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# ISABEL

by

GERALD GOULD

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*To one who*
*though she does not share Isabel's views*
*has sympathised with the unfolding of Isabel's*
*character*
*and has by her sympathy*
*been an inspiration to the author*
*in his task*
*this book is dedicated*
*with love*

The people and incidents in this book are imaginary. No character is drawn, even indirectly, from any living person. Similarly, of course, no reference is intended to any actually existing company, journal, society or other institution ; and if any apparent resemblance has slipped in, it is unintentional and without significance.

G. G.

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# BOOK ONE

# BEGINNINGS OF ISABEL

# CHAPTER I

## THE TENNIS-PARTY

A lady, in the sentimental derivation, meant originally a woman who gave bread to those that needed it. This is the story of a woman who gave love to those that needed it.

And because some were grateful for the gift, and some ungrateful : some grateful for a time, and ungrateful afterwards—because some needed her with passion, and some only with greed—because, with her beauty, and her intelligence, and her simplicity, and her many friends and many enemies, she became a sort of legend, and her reputation a sort of battle-ground for theories about sex and morals—because of all this, she has been sometimes taken as a type, a typical figure of an England troubled by the back-wash of war. But to those who knew her in the lovely flesh, she seemed not a type at all, but a person—immediate, intimate, and inevitable. She was not clever (and what could be less typical of post-war England than not to be clever ?). She had the intelligence that goes with beauty. She was old enough, during the war itself, to feel oppressed by it, and young enough to be quite dumb and uncritical about the fact of oppression. She did not dress wounds, or drive cars, or serve in canteens ; she was still at school. But she felt, without ever trying to explain it or having it explained to her, that something was

being spoilt for her by the blur of khaki everywhere, by that rumble of guns imagined from across the Channel, by the casualty lists that grew longer as she grew more able to understand them. Her schoolfellows would be absent suddenly, and come back after a few days with red eyes and listless manners : a brother was gone, or a cousin, or even—if the girl were one of the older ones—a promised husband. Nothing as sharp and close as that came home to Isabel : her father was past the age for military service, and of her own generation there was only her sister, Rosamund : but her heart, tender and immature, bled blindly for the general grief. Lessons seemed scarcely worth while in such an atmosphere ; prizes were trivial, not worth winning ; even games, unless one could forget for a little, were not wholeheartedly games. A whole generation grew up under that shadow : who can wonder if it believed it had something to make up for ? Rosamund, for one, decided that there was a good deal she owed herself. Isabel, characteristically, ached to make something up to others.

A tennis-party, in 1919, was still neither one thing nor the other. In full peace-time, relaxation and enjoyment are matters of course : in full war-time, they are escapes or victories ; but, so soon *after* war—the air still heavy with bereavement, newspapers still rabid with the topics of conflict, Conferences and blockades perturbing and disintegrating Europe—one could not take the old routines for granted, or adjust oneself to the new. Nevertheless, there were tennis-parties ; and one was given for Isabel and Rosamund. Their mother said the dear girls would

like it ; and the dear girls knew better than *not* to like what their mother planned for their benefit.

Their house, in the lower and richer part of Hampstead, was largish, oldish, ugly and inconvenient : one of those houses that look as if they must be comfortable inside because they are so detestable outside, but defeat expectation. It had, however, a tennis-lawn, no worse than most private tennis-lawns—never quite sufficiently rolled, or quite sufficiently mown, or quite sufficiently marked ; for that matter, never quite sufficiently drained from the beginning ; a little wavy, a little bumpy, and situated on a slight declivity : but demonstrably a tennis-lawn. Moreover the garden was overlooked by a balcony ; and this was felt to add a touch.

On this hot afternoon of June, 1919, Mrs. Skelton stood in an attitude of comfort on the balcony, and regarded her dear girls with approbation. The maternal ego brooded mildly on its own expansion. She would have said, with conviction, that they got their looks from *her* ; and her husband would not have disputed it—he was not interested in looks, nor even startled by his own. Never at any time in his life would his appearance have sustained comment with credit ; he was a mean-looking little man, and his face, thrown together carelessly in the first place, was ravaged with the symptoms of habitual self-importance. His wife, on the other hand, though short and fat, had in fact been a pretty girl, with tidy features and a bright complexion : the features were blurred now, and the complexion crumpled and broken up, but to herself in the glass she looked the same as ever ; and she saw in her children, except

when they irritated her by going their own ways, nothing but her own charm perpetuated. There they sat, in deck-chairs beside the tennis-lawn, and waited for the party : Isabel drooping slightly in exquisite appreciation of the heat, the light, the flowers, the approaching excitement—Rosamund, as usual, with the quizzical look of a naughty angel about to make a grimace, the tip of her nose and the corners of her wide mouth lifted like marks of interrogation—both tall, and perfectly made, and flushed with sun and youth and pleasure. Nature is notorious for its mistakes ; but much may be forgiven it for this recurring miracle—that, from the union of the petty and the ugly, it will rear, many and many an unexpected time, an effortless beauty that takes away the breath.

Arthur Benson was the first guest to arrive—an old-young man, slouching and perpetually indignant. He had gone to the war, after characteristically delaying long enough to provoke talk in the neighbourhood : characteristically, having once made up his mind to go, he distinguished himself by a reckless assertiveness bordering on the savage. The neighbours, who had watched him with displeasure as he slouched up from the cantankerous nursery stage through a grubby and angry boyhood, said with satisfaction that the war would make a man of him ; but he came back with the slouch pronounced. He had known Isabel and Rosamund since they were fat, appetising little bundles in a common perambulator ; his father, the doctor, had brought them into the world. He came now through the drawing-room out on to the balcony beside Mrs. Skelton, swinging

his racquet awkwardly at her by way of greeting, and slouched on down the steps and across the lawn. Approaching the girls, he waggled his racquet again, as if to cover embarrassment—and sank with a groan at their feet.

"Hullo, Bel," he said to Isabel: and to Rosamund, "Hullo, Ros." Isabel gave him no reply except the slow, detached, adorable smile with which, at that age, she used ignorantly to distract her world; Rosamund began pulling his disorderly locks, one by one.

"Those whites aren't fit for a hero to be seen dead in," she said presently.

"I know," said Arthur gloomily: "I put them away in the wrong creases."

"But, darling," said Rosamund, "you ought to have a good woman to fold your trousers *for* you. Not that you'd pay for dressing, God knows."

"Are you putting in for the job?" asked Arthur, slightly hostile.

Rosamund considered. "Yes and no," she said. "I love you more than anybody in the world except Isabel, but then I know so few people that aren't beastly, and the dear knows who I'll marry. And I think I want to marry money."

"I shall have money all right, sooner or later," said Arthur, apparently uncheered by the prospect. "If I can't make it, I shall attract it by my charm. Only, if I've got to marry either of you, I'd rather it was Isabel. You're much more amusing, but who the devil wants amusement from a wife? Bel at least has looks and a kind heart; and, as for loving,

that ought not to come to a nice girl till after marriage."

"O, Isabel would *love* you all right," said Rosamund. "She'd love anything. But that's only a small part of modern life. What you lack, my lad, is a direction for your beastly ambition. You need a devil-fish to bite your tail."

"God forbid!" exclaimed Arthur, stung for a moment by real apprehension.

"It's my belief," went on Rosamund with animation, "that you'd like the two of us—one to fetch and one to carry, and both to smooth you down when you felt cross. And what do you mean anyway, 'Bel has looks'? I'm as good-looking as Isabel."

"I prefer Bel," said Arthur stubbornly. "Hullo, here comes the ghastly party!"

It came indeed, streaming out on to the balcony through the french windows of the drawing-room, surging round Mrs. Skelton like an amiable sea, breaking up and scattering about the garden till its whites and pinks seemed to rival the flower-beds in pattern and colour: two or three vociferous girls, racquet-swinging, sunburnt, more or less alike to the inconsiderate eye, yet each, to herself, what a heaven and hell of fulfilments and disappointments!—youths, frankly impatient to cut out the amenities and hit balls: an ex-officer or two, trim and avuncular: Arthur's father, handsome and terrific, consciously and contemptuously the best player likely to be there: his wife, lean and hard-bitten, fit mate for him in life and lawn-tennis: and a non-playing vicar. There arose that hum, that babble, of careless half-intimate talk, which is like the multitudinous

twitter of starlings, and somehow blends with flower-scents and blue air and the sense of slowly-moving shadows, and goes echoing away towards evening and evanescence, a trivial and touching thing. Parties are so gay, and break up into such various importances ! The doctor powerfully summoned a four, and play began. The twittering trailed into dialogues : the vicar was wondering if he need stay to tea.

Hot and moist, after a mixed double, Isabel and Arthur strolled away together, behind a yew-hedge, down by the greenhouses, out of sight of the rest. They walked in silence, old comrades, accustomed to the injustice of elders, long agreeing to be inarticulate. But though two people can hold together in silence for a long time, especially if they have known each other from childhood, there comes a point where not to speak is to be strangers. Necessary confidences bank themselves up in the mind, we flatter ourselves that we have implied them, that they need not to be uttered—and then we realise that, unless they are spoken, they will die. Arthur and Isabel had known each other disarmed, had seen each other in the humiliations of childhood, greedy, sick, cross, punished : suddenly, there was a difference : from now on, if they continued to take their affection for granted, they would drift apart. Arthur, at twenty-five, was six years older than Isabel in mere age. In experience, reading, speculation, he was far older still. They never thought of each other as anything but equals.

" Does that crowd amuse you, Bel, or doesn't it ? " Arthur asked presently. The habitual surliness of his

tone was absent now ; yet, when he used it, it was a genuine habit, not an affectation. His sense of revolt was half genuine drive and half the shoddy stuff of immaturity : the whole of it had gone from him now, in this companionship, in this peace, in the summer sun.

" Life amuses me," Bel answered, after taking, in her fashion, time for thought. " I don't think I'm old enough, yet, to distinguish very clearly among people. I mean—you know the way, when one is a kid, one accepts people as filling a certain place. That's Mummy, that's Daddy, that's Nanny, that's Arthur, that's Cook. One doesn't wish them different, because one doesn't realise they *could* be different. I think I'm a little like that still."

" Perhaps it's the final truth about human relationships," said Arthur seriously. " After all, you know, they *couldn't* be different. But that's all the more reason for picking and choosing. I don't like my father : I never have. I don't like *your* father : I never have. But I don't waste time wanting either of them to be different from what he is. I keep out of their way."

"Ah, well, Arthur"—the answer came on a sigh—"it's easy for you to keep out of people's way. You're a man, and you've been to the war, and you're educated, and you've even got some money of your own. You can go where you please. It wouldn't do for *me* to start wanting to keep out of the way, because I couldn't."

" My dear Bel," said Arthur almost irritably, " there's a deeper reason than that. *I* can go away, because nobody wants me in any particular place.

Wherever *you* are, you make a sort of centre, and people come to flutter round you. All your life, you'll never be able to get away. You'll have to face things, and people. That's why I ask if you're satisfied with the people you're facing now."

Isabel stopped dead, and looked at him with a sort of despair.

"O Arthur," she said, "how can I tell? I've no standard to go by. I'm too young."

Standing there in her short white dress, with her hands clasped behind her, her face flushed and damp, her dark-blue eyes wide open almost as if with fright, she looked indeed too young for life's dangerous decisions. "Put her back in the nursery!" cried Arthur's heart, futile with sudden pain. The only thing about her that suggested grown-upness, apart from her height, was the fashion of her hair. Grown long, it had recently been gathered into a careless heap of light and colour on the nape of her neck : incapable of tidiness, it strayed in curls of pale brown and shining yellow over the blue veins of her temples : in its rather pathetic attempt at dignity, it made her, after all, Arthur thought, look younger than ever.

"Have you any idea at all, my dear," he said, "what you want to do with your life?"

She thought again, looking at him wide-eyed, like a child remembering a lesson.

"Yes, Arthur," she said at last. "But it's so vague. I don't know how to put it into words for you. I've never even tried to put it into words for myself. It'll sound priggish if I *do* try. But you wouldn't think me a prig, would you, Arthur? You wouldn't think I

was trying to be unselfish or generous, or any rot like that? Or would you?"

"No, Bel," said Arthur gravely. "I wouldn't do that."

She looked at him still, but with a closer gaze, recognising his irony, piercing through it to a reassurance.

"I'll trust you, Arthur," she said. "I can always trust you. I couldn't tell anybody else in the world, except Rosamund; and Rosamund would laugh."

She laid her hand on her breast, with a childish gesture, and paused.

"I've got something," she said presently. "It isn't knowledge and sense, like yours, or charm like Rosamund's, or anything I can give a name to: but it's real; it's *me*: it must be for something, or for somebody. It can't be that I should feel so rich and never be able to give anything at all?"

Arthur took her arm, and pulled her round rather roughly. "No, my dear," he said. "I shouldn't bother about that if I were you. I'm sorry I asked you silly questions, but there was something vague between us that I wanted to get defined. I haven't got it, of course. Let's go and watch my parents play tennis."

# CHAPTER II

# RECOLLECTIONS OF CHILDHOOD

Isabel sat at her window, dreaming. It is the appropriate attitude for a maiden in the twilight. Rosamund, who regarded her sister with a queer mixed feeling of exasperation, respect, amusement, indulgence and ardent love, would have been less irritated if she could have suspected a pose. To model oneself on the appropriate is, after all, to show a care for the ideal: hypocrisy (Rosamund said) is the tribute that youth pays to convention. But Isabel was too humble to work at humility. She fell with a maddening ease into reverie and abstraction. The twilight meant to her what it has meant to the poets, whereas Rosamund was driven to reading poetry.

The evening meal, always begun punctually at seven, on their father's return from the City, was over. The dusk was gathering, thrummed through with the soft noise of moths. Even in London, June smells besieged the open window. Jasmine was in the air. To Isabel, all her life, this hour had come with a clutching and hurting loveliness and loneliness—all her life that she could remember, all her happy but puzzled childhood. The fading of colour out of the day did actually feel like the draining of blood from her heart, of hope from her future. She did not

put the feeling into words, or conscious thoughts : she remembered it from long before she knew the power of words. At every time of year, this gradual change from light to dark was an enemy, but a beautiful enemy, one that came with the weapons of wooing and pleading : but the sense of it was heaviest in the summer, when the twilights were long and full of fragrance.

Rosamund went out, slamming the bedroom door behind her : she ran down the stairs humming. Isabel sat by the open window and remembered her childhood. She remembered, very dimly, a period of plump and rosy acceptance, when everything had been as it had to be, and every person in her orbit established beyond question or wonder. There had been a succession of Nannies, but vaguely, now, they seemed all to have been the same Nanny. Their varying ages, personalities, methods, seemed to merge in an even flow of crooning, dressing, undressing, scrubbing, scolding, kissing and slapping. They were Function, not Form. Isabel could not remember the arrival of her sister—there was only a year between them ; but she could just recall an early sense of importance and responsibility, of being the bigger and elder, a sense which had soon died under the impact of Rosamund's assurance and impudence. Most vividly of all, she remembered going to school.

Not the Kindergarten—that was fun as far as it went, but it did not amount to much in memory. She liked trotting off, hand-in-hand with Rosamund—particularly on frosty mornings : she liked the sharpness, the activity, and the safety : she liked to feel

that other hand in hers. She enjoyed the round games and the singing : nobody pestered her to learn very much. That school was like an extension of home : there was to come a fatal evening when she discovered that, in her father's view, it was not a school at all. She re-lived the scene now : she often did so, for it had been the first dramatic turning-point of her life. From it, people had emerged as persons. They had ceased to be automata, instruments of destiny, things as acceptable as mornings and meals. They became suddenly differentiated and terrible. They could be appealed to, and refuse the appeal.

Her father—she remembered it doubly, the visual memory accompanying the emotional, as sight is synchronised with sound on the films—was standing in front of the fireplace, flapping an evening paper. The day must have been a Saturday, or he would not have been home so early from the City : the season was winter, and a big fire was crackling behind him : the curtains were drawn, tea was over, Isabel had been allowed to bring her bricks down from the nursery : all was warmth and comfort and security—nothing could ever change.

" Mother," said her father irritably, flapping his paper, " isn't it almost time this child was sent to school ? "

The room was cold in a moment. Long, long before the child's mind had time to group and arrange those syllables, before any plain threat of travelling and parting could be read into them, the blind assurance of disaster fell. Something had changed, something was lost, and for ever. The world was not safe.

Her father, in her experience, always spoke irritably, and always as if she were not there. It never occurred to her to intrude her own forebodings. She looked up at him, wide-eyed and waiting.

Her mother, who was sitting in her invariable armchair, between the corner of the fire and the worktable, seemed a little startled.

"Well, Edward, I don't know," she answered. "Isn't she doing very nicely where she is? I hadn't really thought of making any change till Rosamund was better."

Rosamund was away: Rosamund was in the country: Rosamund was convalescent after scarlet fever, which had passed Isabel by. So long as Rosamund was there, security was there too: they were going to take advantage of her absence to hurt, to frighten, to break up the world!

"Nonsense," said Mr. Skelton, and fidgeted. He was a restless little man, slight but paunchy, of an ugliness which would have been funny if it had not been menacing. His hair grew oddly—scarcely any on the top of his head, a great deal over the ears, and out of them; a little down his cheek-bones, with a whisker-effect; a tuft or two, which had evaded the rapid razor, under the angles of the jaws; fine, bold sweeps from the nostrils, and one, oddest and most assertive of all, from the side of the nose. His features were almost as irregular, bold and ragged: his clothes, frock-coat and grey trousers, expensive, but crumpled, smudged and depressed. Isabel was seeing him—really *seeing* him—for the first time in her life.

"Nonsense," he said, fidgeting and flapping.

"Rosamund's been ill—*very* ill." He looked sharply at his wife, as if blaming her ; yet suddenly, and for an unseizable moment, it seemed as if something other than a habitual egoism and dyspepsia flickered behind the surface of those prominent, slaty eyes : as if there were a reservoir of affection, of humanity, upon which the mere mention of his younger daughter could draw. The gleam passed, and the newspaper was flapped more violently.

"Rosamund's been ill," agreed his wife placidly. "But she's getting on nicely now. We shall have her back quite soon, and then, if the girls have *got* to go away, it would be nice for them to go together."

Away ! The cold hand closed on Isabel's heart.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Skelton again. It was his favourite ejaculation. "Isabel's older than Rosamund, and she's not been ill, and I gave notice for her at the beginning of last term."

"O, you did ?" cried his wife, in a little flat tone that might have been taken to mean resentment. It meant stupidity.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Skelton testily. "It's all settled. Isabel's too big for that babies' place—why, the child's turned eight. You don't want her to go on for ever making holes in putty, do you ? Good God Almighty, woman, you don't want her to grow up a great uneducated gawk, do you ? You don't want her to grow up an imbecile, do you ? You don't want her to be a public disgrace to you all over Hampstead, do you ? She's got to *learn* things, dammit ! She's got to be a credit to her father ! She's got to go to a school that *is* a school !"

Isabel was not frightened by this torrent. It was

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part of a process which in later years she was to come to know as " father working himself up." She recognised it now, without naming it. Often it meant nothing ; but this time she knew that it meant too much. She was not frightened by the empty air of anger ; she was sick with fright of the purpose behind it.

" Very well, dear, if you say so," said Mrs. Skelton, threading a needle. It was the ultimate irony, but she did not know it. It summed up and indicated the whole life of her home, and the thousand homes like it that lay around. Placidly, she went on sewing. And Isabel dared not ask, and never afterwards knew, why the decision had been taken, why the particular school had been chosen, why a boarding-school was preferred to a day-school. She knew only that her world was shattered and her doom decreed.

That night she lay long awake. For the first time, she knew terror—not the mild and reasonable fears of childhood, fear of being sick again when you have been sick once, fear of being late for school, of being discovered in naughtiness. This was something new, huge, not to be tackled. It hung over the room like a black cloud, and yet from the heart of the cloud darted out red licking tongues of fire. It pressed down, on eyes and throat and chest : hardest of all it pressed on the pit of the stomach, and a cold sweat broke out all over her body. She was going to vomit, she was going to scream ; but she neither screamed nor vomited—she lay there sweating and biting the sheets.

The next day, she forgot. It was holiday-time ;

Christmas holidays, as memory afterwards established, though there seemed no Christmas context at the time : the gaiety of the season had passed, had dropped back into unreality, into the good familiar days that terror had abolished. Still, there were the holidays ! Leisure to read, leisure for games with the children next door, leisure for surreptitious half-hours over cards with the housemaid ; and though leisure was the last thing the child wanted, with that terror waiting to pounce, she knew how to fill the minutes with distraction. She forgot—on and off. But never altogether, never so as to be free from the waiting shadow. All the while, something half-heard was saying to her that, if she stopped playing, fear would return. And return it did, blindingly, crushingly, suddenly, in the pleasant sacred hour after tea, when she settled down on her stomach by the nursery-fire with a book. This was the happiest part of the day, as a rule : it was looked forward to, loved, hugged in anticipation ; the hour when she was most assured of her surroundings, and most herself. Now she knew that it would never be the same again. A door closes in the heart when we first understand the word " never."

The days passed, oscillating between forgetfulness and despair. *The* day came—the point of fate, to which all the half-disguised preparation, the fitting and sewing and whispering, had tended. There was a new uniform, a horrible kind of sailor-business, the livery of the new servitude. Isabel, white and speechless, suffered herself to be dressed in it. Her mother, in black and beady " best," clucked a little distressfully. The housemaid was in tears. The box was

packed. The cab, an old-fashioned four-wheeler, smelling of lost opportunity, stood outside the front garden-gate. And then at last the bomb, which had been swelling in the child's breast through the morning, burst. A great, hard, swelling ball of woe, it suddenly could not be borne : Isabel herself scarcely knew that the screams were coming from her own mouth, but she knew that she had thrown herself, in a paroxysm of agony, on the hall-floor.

" I can't go ! I can't ! I won't ! " she was crying. " I can't bear it ! You don't understand ! "

Her mother, clucking, pulled her up and hustled her into the cab. There was no hope, no help. Nobody knew, nobody would ever know, what she suffered. It was the end.

Actually, after a few days of hysterical misery, she settled down at school. She did not like it, but the blind threat of unendurable pain had not come to fulfilment. There was a routine, and Isabel accepted it. There were some pleasant girls, and she loved them—to love somebody was the first need of her nature, and she could not be altogether unhappy when she could meet it. But she missed her home, she missed the housemaid, passionately she missed Rosamund.

And in the end it was all for nothing. Rosamund was to have joined her for the next term ; but the next term never came. As capriciously, it seemed, as he had decided for boarding-school, their father decided against it. But, remembering the *volte-face* afterwards, Isabel wondered if there had not been more motive than caprice. Rosamund did not want to join Isabel at boarding-school : she wanted to

go to High School, and she wanted Isabel to go with her. What Rosamund wanted, somehow, without much open wheedling and with very little loss of temper, she usually got. Especially from her father ! He was disagreeable and dangerous and dictatorial, but he could be got round. Isabel had no notion of doing it herself, no notion even of how Rosamund did it. Much later, when in their teens they began to be busy about finding words for actions, Rosamund gave her own flippant explanation. " He's a queer fish," she said, " and I play him by ear." It was a denial of conscious method, and it was almost true.

" Strange ! " thought Isabel, remembering with a smile. Rosamund had always been the naughty one, the cheeky one, and had usually managed to slip out of the consequences. When she had succeeded in luring Isabel into a companionship of sin, chances of escape were lessened, for Isabel was useless at deceit. One gloriously successful outburst, however, they had had, quite recently—Isabel recalled it now, in the summer evening, and her smile widened to a grin. Only last November—but she had not been grown-up then. Her hair had still been in a pigtail. She had been eighteen, Rosamund seventeen. They ought to have known better ! And yet, was it possible to regret anything so satisfying and exciting ?

It had been Rosamund's idea, of course. Armistice Night ! Late, very late, after they were supposed to be in bed, they had put on old clothes, climbed the wall at the bottom of the back-garden, gone round to the 'bus terminus, and so to the West End. Isabel remembered—but how little, beyond the sensation of adventure, and noise, and light, she did in fact

remember ! The whole evening rang like bells in her head when she thought of it. They were jostled, and surely, unless her memory was more confused than she thought possible, kissed ! Kissed several times, by men in khaki : hoisted, at one point, on the top of a taxi : dropped, unnoticed, when more girls were pushed up in their places. It had been Carnival, release, fulfilment ! It was difficult to think of it as wrong.

One moment of awe there was, outside the library window, which looked sideways on the shrubbery, and had been carefully unlatched before they started.

" What a row there'll be if we've been missed ! " she whispered almost soulfully, staggered yet delighted by her own audacity. " I feel as if I was a kid again, and in for a good hiding ! "

" Beautiful upon the mountains," said Rosamund. " are the feet of him that bringeth good hidings. Up you go ! "

A few minutes later, they were in bed, giggling with delicious relief in each other's arms.

# CHAPTER III

## A TALK ON LOVE

Hampstead, like anywhere else, is the centre of the universe. To Isabel Skelton, dreaming by the jasmine-haunted window, the world opened out in every direction, avenue upon avenue of hope and trust. She knew too little of life to be afraid of it. She was not ambitious, but she was adventurous. She wanted things to happen, and believed they would. Her social horizon was narrow, her circle of acquaintance small ; it was out of the question that she should foresee the manner of the opening, the complications and intensifications, the thunder and lightning upon left and right. If anybody had told her that her life was not to be spent in that road or the next, not to be consecrated to the care of an ordinary husband and ordinary babies, she would have felt, with part of her mind, surprised : but something in her, much more real and fundamental, would have accepted the statement simply. Her ignorance of that little thing which is called the great world, of politics and society and the arts, was huge and superb ; but there was in her a different sort of greatness, an adequacy to emotional occasion : little as she could estimate in advance the particulars of what would invade and mould her personality, she was ready, and aware of readiness.

Dreams troubled her—such dreams as the puritan

prurience of her parents would have muffled in silence and horror ; but it was characteristic of Isabel never to feel shame over the processes and impulses of her own body. Day-dreams and night-dreams might solicit a passion as yet quite unaroused—the night-dreams with a particularity which the day-dreams could not justify or control ; she was not such a fool as to confess it to the uncomprehending, but from Rosamund, closer and dearer to her than herself, she kept no secrets. Sometimes, vividly aware of the strong tide of blood flowing and beating through heart and wrists and temples, she would burn with a sudden blush. This phenomenon delighted Rosamund, who was quite unimpressed by the ardour of maiden dreaming. Rosamund said she hated to say it, because everybody else had said it first, but the quiet ones were always the worst. " Cut it out, my girl," was Rosamund's philosophy : " and if you can't cut it out, keep it in ! If you can't be good, be Hampstead ! " But Isabel was by nature good and careless, and Hampstead was not destined to limit her career.

She spent the whole evening gazing out of the open window into the warm night, her hands lying in her lap. It was the one of her habits that most exasperated her mother ; but nothing could cure her. "Why in the world," said Mrs. Skelton, " the child can't be doing something *useful* ! . . . Why, I'd rather see her read ! " But Isabel continued to waste her evenings, and even (a double sin) her mornings, lost in reminiscence and reverie, and anticipation of she knew not what. A Victorian generation might have whispered that she was going into a decline, but the

deep, even, wholesome red of lip and cheek would have contradicted it. To the Georgian household, she seemed merely bone-lazy and brain-daft.

Rosamund was different. Rosamund was vigorous, contemptuous and amused. At the age of eighteen, she was rushing through the curriculum of a Business College—shorthand, typing, book-keeping, filing and the rest of it. Her father objected, and acquiesced. It was a point of pride with him that his girls need not work for their livings. He wanted them to be "ladies," but they were poor material for that. He might as well have tried to harness the quiet south wind and the eager east ; but he had no inkling of his difficulties. To Isabel he was indifferent and dictatorial, unaware of the places in which her spirit travelled. Of Rosamund, in his heart, he was afraid. He was shady and shabby in business, and he believed she would find it out.

The sisters shared a room—big and cool and fragrant, distempered and cretonned in white and pale green, the two beds curtained off in corners, the mantelpiece friendly with photographs, low arm-chairs by the fireplace, a wide sill for sitting at the window, many-coloured cushions everywhere. The house was large enough to accommodate them separately, but they preferred to be together. "Isabel would be lost without me," said Rosamund, flicking aside her own affections. But she would confess to needing a recipient for her confidences—"a cess-pool," she called it, "for girlish blah."

Late that evening she came back, and, without turning on the light, tossed her hat on a chair and crossed the room to Isabel's side. She knelt, and the

two looked out together. The night was quiet; a big moon, from behind the shoulder of the house, was throwing long shadows across lawn and flower-bed, and painting the shrubberies in flecks of black and white. The damp of dew had begun, and all the summer scents were intensified in the dusk. "My Bel," said Rosamund presently, "I believe I've fallen in love."

Isabel started. Dreaminess, carelessness, were gone on the instant. It was as if something came alive and alert in her with sympathy. But she always expressed herself more easily by stillness than by gesture, and more easily by gesture than by words. It was not lack of the power to speak that kept her silent : it was a profound instinctive conviction of the futility of speaking. In most situations, she felt, it was best to say nothing, because there was nothing to say. Nothing, that is, for *her*. Rosamund, here again, was different, and chattered because she had to.

"I've been kissed," said Rosamund, "and I liked it."

Isabel did not underestimate the confession. It would have been easy, and accurate, to answer : "But you've been kissed often and often !" Rosamund had not waited to the age of eighteen before exploring the reactions of the male. At fourteen, she had been a notorious note-passer and assignation-suggester ; at fifteen she had, on getting into the school hockey eleven, "given up boys," as she told her resentful discards, "for the ideal of clean English sport" ; at seventeen she had acquired, apparently from nowhere, the technique of a hardened and finished flirt. Isabel had been kissed too, because her

gentleness would not refuse a gift which cost her so little and seemed to give so much pleasure ; but she did not provoke kisses ; or, if she did, the provocation came from a place too deep for her to be aware of it. She knew, without logical dissection, the difference between her own experiences and Rosamund's (they neither of them counted Arthur as an experience) : she knew also, and at once, the difference between Rosamund's previous experiences, and this.

" Reggie Hatfield," said Rosamund, dropping the syllables like plummets, taking her soundings.

" You're sure you liked it ? You're sure you aren't just being kind ? " Isabel asked presently.

" Kind ? Kind to that self-satisfied seducer ? " cried Rosamund angrily. (Her language was always hyperbolic : she did not suspect Reggie of ever having tried to seduce anybody. But there was often a sort of wild truth in her exaggerations : what she saw, or what she meant, was that he would have liked to think of himself as a scoundrel steeped in seduction.) " When have I done anything to make you accuse me of kindness ? "

" Sorry," said Isabel. " You liked it, and you think you're in love."

" You know what he looks like," said Rosamund, not proudly but defensively. Reggie's looks were in fact the talk of their circle. Girls in their secret thoughts had compared him to a Greek god : Rosamund, openly, had called him a tailor's dummy. Both descriptions were as just as commonplace : you had merely to imagine the tailor going to Olympus for his lay-figures. Long legs, broad shoulders,

straight profile, and curled ambrosial hair—the attributes were there. Feather-heads fluttered and fell before them ; but it seemed odd that Rosamund should have been moved at last.

"Thank you," she added, " for not asking if it's the real thing."

" I wasn't likely to," said Isabel, "when you told me you were in love."

" Listen, Bel," said Rosamund vehemently, " where do we get this ' in love ' stuff anyway ? What do we mean by it ? What does it amount to ? Do you think I'm going to marry Reggie because I've got excited about him ? Do you think I'm a beast if I get excited and don't mean to marry ? How can I help getting excited ? When I go all hot and goosey in a man's arms, that's being in love, isn't it ? But does it mean I want to mother his children ? "

Isabel did not know. All the vague surmises of her quick but undeveloped mind were jostling with the promptings of her sex, in a tumult, in a chaos. She had no guide, no pilot, no star for steering : she knew that the definite unreasoning rules which had controlled her mother's life were not for her, but she had no theory to replace them.

" What made you change your views about Reggie ? " she asked, taking refuge in the concrete.

" Reggie did," said Rosamund. " He's been coming home with me from Chancery Lane station most evenings. At first I thought it was frightful cheek, and turned the frozen shoulder. But he became humble—can you imagine Reggie humble ? That disarms a girl, doesn't it ? I wanted to go on being a brute, but I hadn't the spirit for it. And you know how friendly

feelings batten on themselves ! Before I knew what was happening, I was booked for an evening stroll on the Heath. Well, dash it all, Bel, you know what that leads to ! A hundred turnings, and not one of them the right one ! I expect I'm in the walking out stage already ; and yet I'm still not sure that I won't walk out on Reggie."

"You will," said Isabel, trusting her instinct. "Sooner or later, you're bound to. The alternative's too ghastly. I can't have my Rosamund a Hatfield. I can't *see* you one. You burn too bright. But tell me exactly what happened."

Rosamund began to laugh. Her laughter was always delicious, low and heartfelt, clear and caressing and absurd. But to-night it was a little self-conscious.

"There *is* a funny side, isn't there ?" she pleaded. "There was Reggie—I could feel him trembling a yard away, and somehow that touches the old nerves. And then suddenly, behind a bush, he put his arms round me, and began burbling. I couldn't tell you what he said—he can't have had the faintest idea himself. And then he kissed me. Not the usual sort of kissing. Not the sort that happens at dances. Not the sort we used to give, when we were kids, to boys going back to the front. It sounds too absurd, but I began trembling too. And kissing him back. And liking it, same as what I told you at the start. Now *you* say something."

"Is it going to happen again ?" asked Isabel.

"You bet it is," said Rosamund. "It's going to happen again to-morrow night. And then the night after that."

Isabel wondered. It seemed to her that here were

all the vast vague problems, which people called "moral" and "social," brought down to the test of what happened to one person—and that person, her lovely and laughing sister. She felt frankly and passionately partisan. She would be sorry enough that any harm should come to Reggie; but that did not count on the balance. It was Rosamund that mattered.

"If we are going to be honest with ourselves," she said slowly, "there's only one question worth asking. How far do you mean this to go?"

"No!" Rosamund's reply came with the accent of protest, and she hammered with her fist on her sister's knee. "It isn't the question! It isn't even a fair question! I didn't want to be caught in the funny business, did I? Why should I have a plan and a theory about it? Why shouldn't I just let it rip?"

"Is that fair to Reggie?" asked Isabel, puzzled and puzzling.

"Reggie's asked for whatever he gets," said Rosamund stubbornly. "I can't help Reggie's troubles."

"You don't love him a lot, do you?" said Isabel.

"Love him? No! Haven't you read in a thousand books that loving a person is different from being in love with him? You take it from me—the books are quite right. I don't feel tender or unselfish or affectionate about Reggie. I don't care about him the way I do about you. But I don't go goosey kissing *you*, and I do go goosey kissing *him*. What does A. do about it?"

"I don't feel like that about loving and kissing," said Isabel, with a frown. "I may be a prig, but

I couldn't get excited on top unless I was excited deep down. And then I should want to give everything."

Rosamund sat up on her heels.

"Everything?" she cried, as if she were frightened. "What do you mean by everything? Do you mean you're going to marry the first blighter that gets you worked up over a cuddle?"

"Not marry, perhaps! I can imagine loving a man very much without wanting to marry him. I can imagine loving more than one man very much—and I couldn't marry two! What I can't imagine is being in love without loving, or loving without wanting to give."

Rosamund shook her head, still protesting.

"I want to *give* all right. That's half the trouble. I've found out something about my mechanism this evening, my dear, and it's going to be a damn nuisance. In a rational world, Reggie and I would be able to give each other what we both want. In Mummy's day, we shouldn't have been allowed to go on the Heath together after dark. The world isn't rational, and Mummy's day is over, thank God!—and you and I are let down in between."

"Girls used to go away with men during the war," said Isabel slowly. "Week-ends. *You* know as well as I do. It was you who spotted it. Dora did it. Irene did it. Do you think any the worse of them?"

"I don't think so," said Rosamund. "But it was different in the war. When a man was probably going to be killed, and asked you for something he could remember while he lived, it must have been frightfully difficult to refuse. If that was wrong, it was

part of war's being wrong. If it was false sentiment, it was because war's chock full of false sentiment. But Reggie's come through safe, and anyway he was only out for a few weeks at the very end. I'm not going to commit myself to anything because Reggie *might* have been killed. The men that Dora and Irene went with are both dead. The girls can start fair. But if I let myself in for Reggie, I'm going to see his funny face all over Hampstead for a life-time. I'm afraid the war's no guide."

" There's no guide anywhere, as far as I can see," said Isabel sadly. " I suppose in a way we should have found things easier if we'd been brought up religious. Going to church with Mummy was such bunk. I can't remember the time when I didn't realise that she didn't really believe a word of it herself; and of course *I* didn't believe, and *you* didn't. And now she doesn't even try to make us pretend, and we shouldn't if she did. But the people who do believe are the ones who know where they are. So-and-so is wrong, and you mustn't do it, and you don't, and that's that."

" Religion is the opium of the people," said Rosamund, who had read avidly about the Russian Revolution. " If I believed, I should be frightened to go walking with Reggie on the Heath, and letting him kiss me, because I should think God was going to be cross with me if I did. But I should *want* to get the kissing, and my instincts would be just the same. Funking a problem isn't solving it."

" And also," said Isabel, carrying on her sister's thought, " if you did suppress your instincts because of religion, and yet never loved anybody enough to

marry him, or if you loved somebody you couldn't marry, then one whole side of your nature would be frozen up and wasted. People who go to church and pray to God believe that God intends the waste of what He's created. It's all very hard."

Rosamund got up and began to undress, throwing her clothes negligently about the room.

"They've got their answer to that," she said. "You can turn your disappointments to the glory of God and the service of man—I've heard those very words in a sermon. And then I suppose it isn't waste. But it would be waste for *me*. I'm not built that way, and I don't believe *you* are. I don't want to remain a virgin all my life, and I'm not going to try."

"Nobody's suggesting that," said Isabel. "The question is whether you oughtn't to control yourself until you have a chance of marrying. Is it so very hard?"

"Not impossibly hard, for me," replied Rosamund cheerfully. Naked now, she was doing the exercises which she always performed before her morning and evening bath. Isabel watched indulgently the antics of the slim, bright figure, glimmering in the twilight of the room. It seemed intolerable to her that *that* should be cheapened or sacrificed. But what was cheapness, and what sacrifice? She did not know.

"What are you going to do about it, Rosamund?" she asked gently.

Rosamund, busily touching her toes, seemed to have transcended her distress.

"I'm going to be a good girl," she said. "But

not *too* good. I'm not going to cut out the kissing, because a girl who stops there can have fun and still be safe. But I'm going to stop at that—in case of accidents. It's rotten for Reggie, and rotten for me. But bless you, it's life."

# CHAPTER IV

## FOUR GOOD MEN

To Arthur, Isabel was more than a problem. She was *the* problem. His mind, active and resentful, saw a world confused—economics, sex, science, at loggerheads, at random. He loved Isabel, and would have liked to place her in the setting of the conventional romance he despised : a queen, gracious, waited upon, the air about her made musical with pipe and viol : and, because he knew that what he regarded as undesirable was also impossible, he was doubly angry that he wanted it. Love for one person, as he saw it, was insufficient : it lost itself in dreams. He was conscious of a power in himself, and, in Isabel, of genius : he had no idea what the genius was *for*. He was sure the girl must be caught in the general trouble, and ought to be. He wanted to shield her, and didn't want to shield her. She was adorable, and a damned nuisance.

His own power he began to direct. Contemptuous of the human brain as an instrument, he consented to see that it was all humanity possessed as a weapon. He trusted his own. He could construct, organise, express. And, on top of the mere efficiency of the machine, he had a gift which surprised him. He knew when to trust his instinct, without drawing, or attempting to draw, that bafflingly fine line, if any, which leaves intellect on one side and instinct on the

other. When he sprang, he could not have told you how long he had calculated first. Suddenly—it might be early, it might be late—reasons fused to produce a light beyond themselves. Arthur was accustomed to say that he never needed to look before he leapt : the leap *was* the looking. He was ambitious, sure of success, and extremely unhappy.

After the war, until the year 1921, he lived at home. The gesture was sardonic. He was indifferent to his mother, and between his father and himself there was the deep unassuageable hatred of two strong natures, each aware of being limited and understood by the other. Dr. Benson was not a pleasant person, but he had his points. He was cruel and efficient—really contemptuous of human suffering, or indeed capable of savouring the spectacle —but quick and resolute in its alleviation. He had determined to mould his wife, and he had moulded her ; she was now like an undistinguished imitation of the personality that presented the imitation to the world. He had determined to mould his son, failed, and discarded the experiment. He had not been, physically, unkind ; the bitterness of his spirit demanded deeper satisfactions. Very early, Arthur had realised that he must assert himself with a certain brutality, or emerge from home-influences a spiritual cripple. Oddly, the thing that rankled most was his father's superlative good looks. To Arthur, his own ugliness was neither here nor there, except in that wounding contrast. The doctor was altogether too magnificent, and took life in his stride.

Arthur was going down town. He was in evening

dress, his white tie rather badly tied, his hair and coat-collar rather badly brushed. He was going to dine with an intimate—not a friend. He did not make male friends. Rosamund and Isabel he loved, but for the most part his contacts were subordinate to his designs. There was even a sense in which his love for Isabel was part of a design embracing his own future and the world's : he had ideas of fitting her into his own handling and shaping of circumstance. On Rosamund, he knew, however much he desired and needed her, he would never have the effect he wanted to have. She was fond of him, and he had some glimmerings of his own feeling for her ; but her independence was vital, personal, essential and complete.

The tube was crowded : half Hampstead seemed to have had the whim for the West End. Arthur got a seat, and did not surrender it to an attractive blonde, who ogled for it, or to a pathetic old lady who would have accepted it with dignity and gratitude. He gutted the evening papers, thrust them untidily behind him, and gnawed his nails, which were not quite clean. Hurrying out at Leicester Square station, he pushed ill-humouredly through a good-humoured crowd towards Piccadilly. The air was sharp, and he liked that. The lights were just on, coloured signs tormented the sky. Something in Arthur gauged the outward signs of prosperity ; he had his own view of the way things shaped.

He turned up the steps of a pompous-looking club, and saw his host beaming genially down upon him. Immediately he felt at home. The two men knew how to use each other.

Sir Leonard Lake was immensely rich, but this was symptomatic, not essential. He was something more than a rich man. Tall, broad, ruddy, youngish, dazzlingly clean, typically British—he *had* to be rich, because without that concomitant he could not have functioned at his best. And he was bound to be at his best always : it was his *métier*.

Before the war, he had been director of two companies : one textile, one steel : both small, solid, old, provincial affairs, redolent of nonconformity, and preferring impeccable reserves to showy dividends. Now, he was director of ten—eight of them different in scope and method from the two originals, which had themselves expanded and altered. His country's necessity, he would always confess, had been his opportunity ; but he had room in his mind for a thousand things besides money. He preferred chamber-music to opera, which he described as a bastard art : did himself nobly in food and drink ; and enjoyed a perfect digestion without boasting about it.

Just now, he was buying papers. He had a daily, but was doubtful about the influence of dailies—unless, of course, one bought *The Times*, which was impossible. " My notion," he had said to Arthur, " is to influence the johnnies who write to *The Times* " ; and Arthur was here to discuss the possibility.

Sir Leonard drank dry sherry, not cocktails : Arthur did not know whether he drank both or neither. The pleasures which had gone to the grand, calm curvature of his friend's stomach were, for him, non-existent, equally with those which thrilled his

friend's organ (whatever such organ may be) of aesthetic response. He never could tell one tune, or one dish, from another. But in his own way he could invest money as shrewdly as Sir Leonard himself: his tiny private fortune had expanded almost insanely through his association with Sir Leonard's companies. Sir Leonard respected him.

They were drawn towards the most desirable table by the bland combination of their own masterfulness and the waiter's sense of it (there are people at whose mere presence good service rises like an exhalation). There came to join them, unostentatiously out of nowhere, the two men who could best advance their plans. Abel Turner, wearing for the evening as for the day a blue silk shirt with a tie of deeper blue, and aware that from that conjunction his own beautiful eyes caught blue fire, was labelled an economist. He taught, indeed, economics to the youth (scarcely younger than himself) of Cambridge. But his grasp of the movements of money was a small part of his eager brain's endowment. Like Arthur Benson, he was ambitious ; unlike Arthur, he could afford to be languid. They went formidably together. The fourth member of the party, a dark indifferent Hebraic creature of perfect figure and nonchalant manners, might have been scheduled by any caricaturist as the Dangerous Business Man. His name was Isaac Whyte, and his finger was in every pie. These four men, calling one another by Christian names without affection, and bound to one another without scruple, were not unwilling, either separately or together, that the world should profit by their

activities. They were entirely determined that they would profit themselves.

"Listen," said Leonard, eating while he talked, and only occasionally laying down his knife or fork to emphasise that he laid down the law: "listen—we are at a turning-point. Don't any of you three start telling me that the world is always at a turning-point, because I know it. Just for the moment *I* am telling *you*. We are just now declining from the peak of an unreasonable boom. There is going to be a bad slump, and then a crash. The only question is—what emerges beyond the crash? World-revolution? A new period of international capitalist expansion and control? A series of jerks, like what you get when a beginner is starting a car—the manufacturers attempting to expand credit so as to sell their goods, then taking fright and wanting to contract it—the banks squeezing the industrials so as to get production mortgaged to finance, and then taking fright and finding too late that it won't pay them to foreclose? This is your field, Abel. Shoot!"

"You don't want technical economics from *me*," said Abel contemptuously. "You all know as well as I do that there's no reason in the world—except the unreason in the world—why a boom shouldn't continue. War has taught us all that the world can batten on waste. The trouble is that we haven't the intelligence for battening. There is no imaginable limit to the process by which the peoples can take in one another's washing: that old joke is a wash-out. But instead of creating money and creating credit and creating needs and making more and more

things more and more quickly and easily, and getting richer and fatter and more and more like you, my dear Leonard, the world is going to turn miserly and contract, and force people to be poor as a penalty for the very process that might make them rich. I'll tell the world—but it won't listen. All that remains is the personal problem. We know that a slump is upon us : we agree that it will lead to at least a minor crash. Personally, I think civilisation will bob up again, like a discredited boxer coming back ; and then some new bruiser will connect to the jaw, and we shall hit the floor with a bigger bump than ever. You want to know if civilisation will last our time ? I think it will, if we make our time a short and merry one."

" Thanks," replied Leonard placidly. " A turning-point, precisely as I said. But don't forget that, along with the general disintegration, goes a steady betterment in certain things. The politicians are supposed to be discredited : I don't care about that. The financiers, we know—we *ought* to know, for we are all in our own small ways financiers—are going to be discredited pretty soon, and not before it's time ! But is there or is there not growing up, somewhere between the sharp dealers and the dull masses, a power of intelligence ? We've seen the cheap-press mind created and placated by the new journalism—and, mind you, educated opinion has been terribly unjust to the cheap-press mind : it's far better that everybody should read something than that most people should read nothing—but let that pass. The question is, are a mental middle-class—what we may call the few-many—going to get

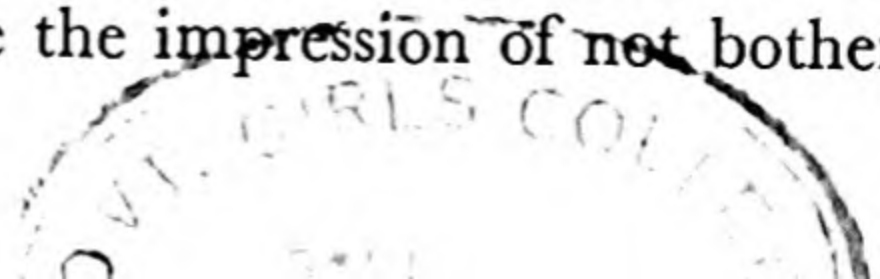
control, and is it worth catering for them, and will they solve the problem ? "

" There are no solutions—only new problems," said Arthur impatiently.

" True," answered Leonard tranquilly. " But there is a difference between knowing what the problem is and refusing to know it."

Isaac shrugged his thin and eager shoulders. " You go too fast and too far," he said. " No wisdom can foretell even the moderately distant future—indeed, wisdom is rather specially unsuited to the job ; for it has to speculate in terms of its own opposite. But we can guess roughly that we are in for a lean period, and that, if ever we come out of it, the few writers and talkers who have shown sense about it will get the credit. You say we are all financiers. I say we are all writers and talkers. I want to see us get together, and get ahead. The two processes which are going to mould our generation are a revision of economic and political theories and a revision of sexual morality. Not one person in ten thousand knows or cares a twopenny damn about the former. Every single person in the world is violently and permanently excited about the latter. I propose that we run a paper to induce a few people to accept sense about politics, under cover of talking sense about sex."

As always, in every gathering, the mention of the word sex created, and destroyed, inhibitions. Each of the four men became a little more tense and bright-eyed : each began to feel that the dinner was worth while, and that he must be careful what he said, and create the impression of not bothering to



be careful. Abel, genuinely the most detached, was at this point the most conventional.

"You can't mix the two things," he said quietly. "You can run a poultry journal, or an ironmongery journal, but you can't run the two under one cover."

"You could," answered Arthur snappishly, "if everybody in the world were an ironmonger, and one ironmonger in ten kept poultry."

"I concede that," said Abel : he had the manner of being able to afford concessions. "I change my mind, and plump for *Sense and Sex*."

"A good title," said Leonard, already apart and alert in a world of private speculation. "A good title, if there is plenty of money behind it for advertisement. I vote we start it and make Arthur editor."

"And a director?" asked Arthur, alive to possibilities.

"We'll all be directors," agreed Leonard amiably. "Nothing so easy as direction. Abel shall turn out the slightly high-brow stuff—not over his own name but at a pitch to get the paper credit. Isaac shall handle the business end in his spare moments. And as for me—well, I'll just be a director."

Arthur, pleased at the moment but always a little rasped, interjected offensively :

"You aren't going to want a special sex-editor, are you? Or to run a weekly sex-supplement? Because, if so, I'm off the whole thing. I'm all for downing damn foolishness wherever it raises its head, but, the moment you concentrate on one brand of folly, all the cranks come round to help you, bringing new foolishnesses of their own. There's nothing, nothing —*we* agree about this, all intelligent men and women

agree about it, and, what's more, always *have* agreed about it and always will agree about it—there's *nothing* about which the entire human race, in one form or another, has made such an utter fool of itself as sex ; but, upon my soul, I think the accepted absurdities are better than most of the reforms. Sex schools —sex congresses—sex experiments—my God ! "

Dinner was over : the four sat, slightly flushed, presiding like the propitiated deities of a worldly creed over a medley of brandy and cigars. There was a double peace, of digestion and of fundamental agreement : for Arthur's outburst was only Arthur.

" I incline to cranks, myself," said Leonard benevolently. " They do the dirty work—get the abuse —and prepare the ground for common-sense. Then men like us come along and reap the harvest. I agree that our own paper mustn't admit them—not too freely, anyway, and not all at one time. I should be inclined to take the idiocies in rotation. But you will find that in the end the idiocies add up to the reform."

" Reform ? " Isaac was plainly startled. " I thought this paper was to be a financial success ? "

" We shan't talk about reform, my boy," answered Leonard. " We shall claim to have achieved it. That *is* financial success."

" A weekly, I suppose ? " said Arthur, half rising, already impatient to get away to his own ideas.

" O yes, a weekly ! "—Leonard had taken it for granted. " Nobody remembers anything from month to month, or from day to day. A high-brow high-spirits weekly, devoted to sense and sex—with art and literature on the side ! "

" We shall want a literary editor ? " queried Abel, frowning.

" O rubbish," cried Arthur, definitely getting up. " You can leave all the kinds of editing to me."

# CHAPTER V

## THE TWO OLIVERS

Nevertheless, a literary editor was needed, and arrived. *Sense and Sex* found him, or he it, with that casualness which so often seems the mark of inevitability. A tall, fattish, shambling creature, with hair completely white and face blurred and lined, but with somehow an air about him of being nice and extremely intelligent, he drifted in to look at books for review, and droned round the office like a vast fly until, to get rid of the sense of his presence, they had to take him on for good.

After that, the permanent staff saw him very little. He would work for incredible hours on odd days ; he would dictate letters casually and quickly during brief visits ; he would go away with great bundles of books under his arm. His name, by irony, was Heyday—Oliver Heyday ; his age was, and apparently always had been, an approximate sixty-five. He enjoyed—really and immensely enjoyed, without at all deserving—the reputation of an unscrupulous amorist.

Somewhere in the dim past he had been briefly and happily married : to-day, there was in his emotional life one person only, and that person his son. All that in old Oliver had once been ambition and hope and need and desire was now concentrated in his feeling for young Oliver—an affection painful,

singular and complete. In the depths of a heart perhaps tragically broken, perhaps only miserably withered, burnt secretly this violent flame. Acquaintances in Fleet Street—surely the most genuinely tolerant and democratic community in the world—said it was a pity about old Oliver ; by which some of them meant one thing, and some another. Of young Oliver, Fleet Street knew nothing.

The war had reached its tentacles towards him, the fingers of the monster had almost closed, but he had escaped with laughter. "Yes," he was accustomed to say, when questioned about his military service, "I was in the army all right : but I didn't go out and fight, or anything like that." Eighteen in mid-1918, he had enjoyed his accoutrements, his companionships, his training, and had been marked down for departure to the front on November 12th. "You can't think," he always said afterwards, "what Armistice Day meant to *me*!" Free alike from that genuine disappointment which many boys felt at missing war's urgencies and excitements, and from that pretence of disappointment which others felt bound to put on, young Oliver reckoned simply that his luck had held. What terror and anguish his father had first suffered and then escaped, he realised reasonably well ; but it was not the habit of himself or his generation to dress such things in words.

Old Oliver and young Oliver, living together in a Bloomsbury flat, often about together, never impatient of each other, formed an astonishing contrast. With one, all was bitterness and evasion, indirection and suppression : with the other, all was frankness and amusement and amiability. For the

one, problems unanswered, too dreadful often to be even asked !—for the other, no problems, but only the graceful acceptance of the moment as it arrived ! By knowing young Oliver, one could form perhaps some secret guess of what youth and joy had dwelt, for a few years of unbelievable ecstasy, in his father's life—the few years before that creature of grace and bloom, that light of beauty in the dark world, the mother of young Oliver, had died.

To be at once a successful editor and a successful speculator in stocks and shares appeared, to Arthur Benson's grasping imagination, a poor life. A man needs a woman to be angry with ; and Arthur had two. He brought his exasperations to Isabel, who listened to them in quiet, and to Rosamund, who made jokes. Both left him hungry and angry ; but it was a state to which he was accustomed. He took his literary editor to see them, and both fell victims to that elderly and resentful charm. Isabel called old Oliver a born uncle, and Rosamund called him an imperfect darling : superficial judgments, but not bad for creatures so immature. The acquaintance, anyhow, was the beginning of Isabel's career.

The girls had formed the habit, only faintly original even then, of having their own friends in their own room in the evenings. Their father objected, saying that, dammit, the place was a bedroom : their mother thought that everything was nice for the dear girls, but that their father's wishes must be respected. Nobody could or did respect anything about Mr. Skelton ; but over Isabel, who still mooned and dreamed, he had the power of the purse, and Rosamund herself had not begun to earn. The

potentiality of liberty, however, is its reality : Rosamund had only to say that—dammit !—she would take a job, and her father retired grumbling behind his newspaper.

Many households are theatres of war, with demands coming up like armies from left and right, and malignancies, camouflaged as reconciliations, waiting the hour to explode their bombs ; but in this household the forces were too irregular in distribution for any decisively open clash. Mr. Skelton, furtive in the City, an impotent tyrant in the home : his wife, opposing to his insistencies an acquiescence more baffling than revolt : Isabel, aching with youth and dreams : Rosamund, too contemptuous of her parents to be rude to them, too fond of her sister to be polite to her, ruthlessly determined on getting her own way but ignorant what her way might be—they made no parallelogram of forces, but only the sort of dust that is bred by friction out in space. Arthur was accepted among them ; the rest of the world was on trial.

By a coincidence scarcely surprising, the two Olivers impinged upon this little world simultaneously and from different quarters. The acquaintance was bound to be made in any case, since the larger world of literature and politics is nowadays scarcely more than a family, and everybody meets everybody soon or late. Old Oliver, dragged in at Arthur's heels, would sit smoking cigarettes—and failing, in the happy informality of those long evenings, to miss his usual drinks : accepting coffee as a substitute for whiskey, watching Isabel, and egging on Rosamund to prattle. He never mentioned his son. The jealousy

which desired to keep apart one youthfulness from another could not have occurred to him as a conscious motive. He knew himself too generous for that sort of thing ; but among the consciously generous we may look for those who most cheat themselves. Rosamund, meanwhile, met young Oliver at a lunch-place near her Business College. Unashamedly, they picked each other up.

Young Oliver had elected to attend the School of Economics—a choice which brought to old Oliver both satisfaction and dismay. It kept the boy in London, which told against loneliness ; but it kept him away from Oxford, and to see his son at Oxford—at Balliol, his own place of intellectual nurture—had always been the father's dream. Heyday was a gentleman, which is a snob in three syllables ; but everybody is a snob, so the number of syllables does not matter ; and there is something far more than snobbishness in this desire, dwelling with each fading and dwindling generation, to see the young walk where their fathers walked before. Traditions may be good or bad ; but this is a loyalty to something more fatal and fantastic than tradition. Something lingers in the green walks and haunts the grey stones, something of oneself, something too good for the self that has gone on and failed : to renew hope is to renew life, and children are the lovely vehicle of that renewal. None of this old Oliver said, and all of this young Oliver saw. But business is business, and may embrace business colleges and schools of economics.

Oxford, old Oliver admitted, was not the only place in the world. He did not really believe this, but he thought it sounded pretty good to admit it.

There was Cambridge—but no : on second thoughts, he could not agree that there was Cambridge. Paris, then ? Paris was not what it had been (whereas Oxford is always what it shall be) ; the modern colonies of Montparnasse are no rivals to the ancient legends of Montmartre ; still, damn it all, there the place was ! It was disreputable, which made it respectable. Why not study painting in Paris ? But young Oliver, who had no gift for painting, except in the idle casual way in which he had a gift for everything, smiled away the idea of Paris. The Slade, then ? The Royal College or Royal Academy of Music ? Young Oliver replied that he was a *petit bourgeois*, and to such the future belonged. His father, who had long been incredulous of the future, sighed and thought he might be right.

On a sunny and windy day in the April of 1922, Rosamund went for a walk with the Heyday child. That was what she called young Oliver, and, partly, how she thought of him. An instinct which she did not try to understand had constrained her from telling him that she knew his father. The two immature light-hearted creatures walked in the lanes of Buckinghamshire, a county already burbling like a beehive with motor-cars ; but they found finally a quiet inn for lunch, and, after bread-and-cheese and beer, Oliver proposed marriage. He was enthusiastic over the project, but strictly honest. He had nothing to offer ; but then he did not want to offer anything. His green eyes flashed and the corners of his eyebrows and funny little moustache shot upwards as he explained his proposal.

" Women," said young Oliver, " are the better

lot. That's the new creed, and I'm the first man to accept it with all its implications thick upon it. Women have more to give, and ought to give more. I'm a pioneer, and you're the very person to push the thing along."

"Thank you," said Rosamund.

"Don't be affected," said young Oliver, thumping the table. "You know perfectly well I'm in love with you and all that; but I'm unconventional. The correct thing for us to do in the given circumstances is to hire a bedroom at this pub, go for a stroll in the twilight and get amorous, come back to tea, go for another stroll in the dusk, come back to dinner, and so to bed. And then in the morning we should get up thinking we were splendid fellows. But we shouldn't be splendid fellows. We should only be imitations! We should only be Bloomsbury! We should, in fact, only be George Eliot! Now I daresay you would like me to fall in with that stuff——"

"Thank you," said Rosamund.

"Don't be affected," said young Oliver. "Listen for a minute to the voice of reason. I like you, and, if you don't like me, I don't know why the devil we are wasting the day together here. We are both of us clever—you more than I, I freely admit it; that's the point of my argument. We know something between us about the way to run a business: all we want is a business to run. It doesn't matter what—we could sell anything, with your brains and my looks——"

"Thank you," said Rosamund.

Young Oliver got up roaring. "You're the dullest woman I know," he shouted at her, really for the

time almost angry ; but he could not be really angry ; he had not the technique. Putting one arm round Rosamund's neck, he rubbed his cheek against the bright softness of her hair. It was an endearing gesture, and she could no more resist him than she could have resisted a kitten. Besides, he was much more than physically alluring ; she knew very well the grip and purpose behind his imbecilities ; she was aware that he and she might make a good thing of life together. The one thing about him that she had never understood was why he should contemplate an ordinary business career, involving routine and subordination—the two purposes for which she found him most unfit. And even that she understood partly ; she knew, and loved, that strain in him of the old-fashioned and quixotic which rejected natural advantages, and insisted on beginning with boredom and with detail. It was characteristic of Rosamund that she saw something of this, at the moment, in his suggestion of marriage : saw it, and loved it, while she could not help laughing at it and him.

" Look here," she said presently, getting up, " I'm not very good at bedroom-ordering, and I'm sure you aren't either—I should like you much less if I thought you were. But there's no law in Bucks against cuddling in the twilight. Come for a walk and don't be silly."

" What you mean," retorted young Oliver, " is come for a walk and *do* be silly. But I can conceive worse ways of spending the afternoon."

They strolled on until the chill and the dusk began to overtake them, and the young smells of

English April assailed their own youth. They walked close together, and began to exchange kisses, and rapture began to trouble them. Rosamund stopped suddenly and said :

"You remember Reggie Hatfield?"

"Good God!" exclaimed Oliver. "What a question at what a moment! Are you modelling your young life on Mrs. Shandy's?"

"No, no," said Rosamund impatiently. "You give me credit for sense when you want me to marry you and half-keep you—give me credit for it now, when we both need it. We are getting a kick out of this love-making, I take it? At any rate, *I* am ; and that's why I asked you about Reggie."

"How does Reggie come into the picture?" asked Oliver, standing and staring.

"Because—and listen carefully to this, for it's important—because, my dear, delightful Oliver, the sort of kick which I am getting out of behaving in this way with you here, I got out of behaving in precisely the same way last year with Reggie on Hampstead Heath."

"Good God!" said Oliver again, and almost reverently.

There was a longish pause. Presently Rosamund spoke :

"Do you think I'm a bad woman, Oliver, or just normal? That's the question, and it's not a bit of good trying to shirk it. I've finished with Reggie, who was an ass ; and, if I had time for regret, I might regret I didn't start on somebody better. But these things take one in funny ways. What we've got to decide—and the answer to your own proposal

depends upon it, among other things—is just what a girl ought to do when she feels what seven girls in ten can't help feeling."

"Make it nine girls in ten," said Oliver, consistently helpful.

Rosamund shrugged away impatiently. "O don't start being chivalrous!" she exclaimed. "I much prefer your silly little cynicisms—they at least belong to your time and place. What do you imagine I really care about proportions? If it were only one girl in ten, or one girl in a hundred, that would be more than enough for me—if *I* was the girl."

"You are wrong, you know, about my cynicisms," said young Oliver. He did not sound more serious than usual, or less cheerful; but Rosamund felt at once that he was speaking sense and truth. "Paradox is expected from bright young men like me, particularly if we go to the School of Economics; so I put my fancies as brightly as I can. I'm not very good at it, really: I know lots of men with half my brains who do it better: but one doesn't want to be out of the fashion in matters that don't count. The real point about this particular fancy is that I'm prepared to back it. I'm only twenty-one; I daresay I've got fifty years of exciting life in front of me; and I seriously want to put those fifty years into one basket. I'm seriously asking you to do the equivalent. I believe monogamy is a more adventurous thing than messing about. I believe it's a more romantic thing. I'm all for it. I believe you and I are amazingly lucky to have met each other so young, to fit each other so exactly, to have so many years to work the experiment out in. But no more Reggie Hatfields!"

"That's it, you see," said Rosamund soberly. She was annoyed with herself for having tears in her eyes, a weakness to which she was unaccustomed. "I can't tell yet what my own attitude to messing about *is*. I think, even inside marriage, I might need my Reggie Hatfields—just to prevent staleness, you know, like a champagne supper for a crew that's in training. But I do want to marry you, darling."

"Sweetheart," said young Oliver, himself not innocent of tears, "if only you'll marry me, you shall have a thousand virgin Reggies sacrificed to you every year, and every other damn thing in the world that you want—if you're sure you do really want it. I don't believe in freedom in marriage, but I believe much less in losing you."

"Then come quickly and tell Isabel," said Rosamund, catching his hand.

Two hours later, still hand in hand, they burst into the big room at the top of the Hampstead house, to find Isabel in old Oliver's arms.

# CHAPTER VI

## THE DOUBLE PASSION

" My darling," said Rosamund presently, when the embarrassments of the situation had been transcended, and the two sisters were left alone for the night, " you know I'm not capable of being censorious—and I'm not in a position to be that, anyway—but *do* tell me what you are doing with your life ? You belong to me in the sort of way that matters, and will go on mattering. Whatever happens to either of us, each will care about the other. That doesn't give one any rights of curiosity, of course ; but it makes one curious. If there's anything you *can* tell me, for God's sake tell it."

" I'm not very quick with words," said Isabel, concentrated and yet abstract—her most irritating mood ! She was indeed, at the moment, not very quick with either words or thoughts. Her latent sex had for the first time been summoned from its deep entrenchments ; the facts that, before, had come to her only as glimmerings and intimations, the mist and music of life, had been compelled into the foreground, had become positive, obsessive, constructive and altogether terrifying. And it was natural that she should not understand.

" Tell me first," she said presently, after a deep silence, " about you and young Oliver. Do you know, I never knew *my* Oliver had a son ! "

"Do I know?" retorted Rosamund contemptuously. "I've rather reconciled myself to knowing the obvious. As a matter of fact, I've been at some pains to keep the two apart. I've welcomed *old* Oliver here (sorry if you wince at the adjective, my darling, but after all that's part of the difficulty) and I've met *young* Oliver in the City—and I've realised, though they're devoted to each other (quite unwholesomely so, in my opinion)—I've realised it was necessary for each of them to go his own way. They were likely to fumble each other's passes—O what's the use of metaphor when you get down to realities? I suppose what I really felt was, quite crudely, that the old boy, though a perfect dear in his own dissipated way (forgive me, darling, but it's no use our talking at all unless we tell the truth)—I suppose I felt that the old boy was a good enough friend, but the young boy was a potential lover. I suppose, all the time—I swear I didn't catch on to it until to-day—I wanted the young one to make love to me, and was afraid my friendship with the old one would be a snag. But, darling, young Oliver and I are roughly the same age. Our idea is that, if we make a mess of life, as most people do, it will at any rate on the balance be preferable to make it together. What in Heaven's name are *you* getting out of this other business? You are beautiful, moderately intelligent (though God knows you are God's fool), and above everything else you are young. I do hate to see a perfect lamb led to the sacrifice. When it's my own sister, I hate it till it makes me sick. Quite without rodomontade, my dearest, if I could get you free of this

business by giving up my own happiness with my own Oliver, I'd do it. I do care for you so frightfully, curse you ! But tell me what's in your mind."

" Well," said Isabel slowly, " more than anything else in the world I want to give happiness. And we can't go about scattering happiness where *we* want to, can we ? The soil has to be prepared for the seed, hasn't it ? I've always felt that if ever I met anybody who really *needed* me—needed *me*, me specially and only me—it would be my job to give myself. And old Oliver (I don't mind the adjective a bit, you know : did you really think oldness and youngness made any difference to this sort of thing ?) —old Oliver needs me *absolutely*. I can't put it stronger than that."

" I don't suppose you can, or need to," said Rosamund drily. " Has it ever occurred to you that more eligible people might need you just as much ? "

" No," said Isabel.

Rosamund got up with a gesture of despair, and began pacing the room.

" Do you know this man's reputation ? " she asked suddenly.

" O, reputation ! " said Isabel—she waved the category aside as if in her sleep.

" Well," said Rosamund viciously, " I don't go round saying nasty things about people, and I don't really care whom they sleep with or what they do—their lives are their business, and my life's mine—but, dash it all, old Oliver Heyday's the talk of Bloomsbury ! Do you want to get yourself mixed up with *that* ? "

"I don't mind," answered Isabel, resolutely realistic.

Rosamund suddenly and wisely abandoned the attitude of protest. She ceased her stamping to-and-fro, and came to nestle down at Isabel's knees.

"Darling," she said, "is it really enough to be needed? It seems to me that any woman can be needed. I suppose that dreadful ass Reggie Hatfield needed me quite genuinely, as far as his capacity for needing went. I don't think you realise how lovely you are. I can't help feeling you could have almost anybody needing you, if you set out to get him. And here is a person—he's the father, and also the friend, which is saying a hell of a lot more, of the man I'm going to marry, so you won't suspect me of belittling him—a person who's old, and tired, and finished, and mouldy. I just *can't* bear you to sacrifice yourself on an altar that isn't even there. You say you don't mind about his reputation in the sex way—but, damn it all, the man drinks."

"I know he drinks," said Isabel. "That's one of the reasons why I'm going to marry him. He won't drink when he's got a proper home, and somebody to comfort him when he's unhappy."

Rosamund snuggled closer, passionately pondering.

"Tell me," she said, "when you say you don't mind about his reputation, what exactly do you mean? You know it's said about him that he makes up to every attractive woman he sees—that he sort of follows and fondles them at dances—that it's not safe to be alone in a taxi with him? Are you *really* indifferent to all that? Wouldn't you like somebody

sort of splendid and jolly and clean to come along and give you fulfilment? Which is a thing you *can't* get out of what's diseased and derelict already."

Isabel shook her head.

"The splendid and jolly," she said, "find their own level. For most people, to be splendid and jolly would be quite enough. They wouldn't want my life thrown in, which is what you're suggesting. Not, mind you, that I believe all the stories about my Oliver. So far as he has gone wrong sexually, I believe it's been out of loneliness and despair. He explained it all to me this evening. You see, he had a married life that was perfect while it lasted. He's not a person who ought to have to live on his own. He draws life from his contacts—and his wife must have been the dearest and nearest thing to him. *You* ought to appreciate that—I imagine there's a lot of her in *your* Oliver. Anyway, she died. She was his ideal, and he was left without it. And, ever since, he's been looking for it and grasping after it in other people. Can you blame him? And can you wonder I'm proud that he's found it in *me*?"

Rosamund shook her head desolately.

"No," she said. "I don't blame and I don't wonder. I'm just mortally sick about it. And now let's talk about *my* troubles. After all, you've got a sister just as much as I have."

"Yes, dear," said Isabel meekly.

"Well, consider my *fiancé* and my future for a moment. The creature's pleasant and pretty, and, if he isn't witty, at least he's acquainted with the fact that he isn't. I want him—that is to say, he gives me certain acute physiological sensations which

I want to satisfy, and want (I've suddenly discovered) to satisfy in connection with him and nobody else. He's going to get a degree this year, and then he'll be a B.Sc. or whatever the filthy thing is called. He knows about things like laws of rent and cycles of trade, and I know how to run an office and keep books and files and bully the stenographers who've been training along with me and think they're as smart as I am. Oliver's idea is that he and I should go into business together. It seems the Big Idea to me. But, though I know a lot about business, I don't know anything about businesses. What are we going to choose ? "

" Ask Arthur," said Isabel : it had been her solution of difficulties for most of her life.

Rosamund stretched out a graceful arm for the telephone, and got a number.

" Hullo," she said. " Yes, darling. Yes, I do want to talk to you : that was one of the things I had in mind when I rang you up. No, I'm sorry : it won't wait. No : it's no use being disagreeable. Listen, darling. I'm going to get married."

Isabel, watching her sister's face, saw it go puckered first with amusement and then, astonishingly, with pity.

" What's he saying—O, what's he saying ? " cried Isabel urgently.

" Hold on, Arthur. Isabel's here and I've got to transmit. He says he can't bear it, and he won't bear it, and he'll see me in bloody hell first, and who's the man ?—Now then, Arthur, I'm talking to you again. You made Oliver Heyday your literary editor, didn't you ? No, it isn't *that* Oliver Heyday—

No, I'm not transmitting that piece—Be quiet and tell me : did you know he had a son ? "

" Well ? " asked Isabel urgently.

" He says yes, he bloody well knew—Arthur again : I'm sorry, darling, if this is upsetting you : but I want a job for my husband, and, as you know all the dirty dogs in the City, I thought you could push him in somehow. It was Isabel's notion really : she's the practical one and I'm the romantic.—O, all right—if you feel like that about it. The household's in bed, but I'll be down to let you in. Yes, you'd better come at once if you've got to come. I'm sorry, sorry, sorry, darling."

She pushed the receiver away from her on the floor and sat back, looking white.

" My God ! " she said sadly. " And I was always quite, quite sure it was you ! "

" It's both of us," said Isabel, not less sadly.

Rosamund turned round and looked at her with something of the fear with which one confronts a maniac.

" Can't you talk sense ? " she asked, with a strain in her voice.

" It *is* sense," answered Isabel, always most sure of herself when most surprising. " My dear lamb, you haven't got to the age of twenty-one without knowing that a man can be in love with more than one person at the same time. A man—or a woman ! I know a *woman* can, because I'm in love with two people at the same time myself."

" Isabel ! " Rosamund got up, astonished. She still looked afraid.

" Arthur's always been in love with both of us—

always, always, since he was old enough to be in love at all. He doesn't need just one of us—he needs us both. And now he's going to lose us both."

Her calm deserted her. She put her face in her hands and began to sob. Rosamund saw the tears forcing themselves between the fingers, and knelt down, trying to pull the fingers apart and kiss her sister's streaming face.

"Listen, my Bel," she said urgently. "What in Heaven's name did you mean by saying just now that you were in love with two people? I accept that you love old Oliver: I'm not bothering you any more about that, though I shall never, never understand. But who's the other?"

"Arthur," said Isabel with a groan.

Rosamund got up again. As soon as she saw a course of action or a line of argument, she could always command her forces.

"If you really feel like that about Arthur," she said, trying to speak coldly, "you can't conceivably let him down. He's your oldest and closest friend as well as a lover. Anyway, it's *your* theory that he's a lover! Personally, I don't profess to understand the whole business. From the way he went on when he heard I was going to marry somebody else, I should have supposed I came first! Not that I want to, God knows! I'm very, very fond of Arthur. I always have been and I always shall be: and of course I've played with the picture of myself as his wife. But he's too much of a brute for me, and we should each of us want our own way. And I've got my Oliver, and I'm content for myself. If that were the whole bag of tricks, I should say that Arthur was disappointed in

love and must bear his disappointment like anybody else in the same position. I'm terribly, terribly sorry, but there it is, and what can we do about it? But then *you* come along with this insane double theory about Arthur's loving you and your loving Arthur—Good Lord, if you haven't gone clean over the edge into lunacy, how does the stuff about marrying old Oliver come into things at all? Talk about *needing*! You've answered yourself already. You say Arthur needs you as well as loves you. For God's sake, girl, marry him and let's have an end of these ravings!"

Isabel raised her beautiful tear-ravaged eyes. She had never been so spoken to by Rosamund before: even in presence of the greater troubles, it hurt her profoundly. But Isabel never answered back.

"You imagine I'm mad," she said quietly, "because the whole business has come on you suddenly, in a series of shocks. But I've been thinking and thinking about it almost ever since I could think at all. I've always had Arthur on my mind. I've always known it was too hard for him to have us both on his heart. I've wondered and wondered if we couldn't combine to satisfy him—but I know you're not made like that, and it would never have been any good proposing it. You see, I'm not possessive in love: I could have shared Arthur with you, but you couldn't have shared him with me, and that was that——"

"I'm not so sure," said Rosamund, remorsefully remembering the demand she had made, earlier that day, for a succession of Reggie Hatfields in her own life. Still, that was different! You couldn't take the Reggie Hatfields seriously—!

Isabel was going on :

" Then I knew, a little while ago, once and for all, that I alone should never be any permanent good for Arthur. There's a devil in him, you know—I can't tell how far it will carry him, or whether the end will be good or bad ; but he isn't an ordinary person. He's terrific. He's dangerous. If he can't get what he wants, he goes mad. And I, alone, shouldn't be what he wants. If I were to marry him to-morrow, he'd start raging with the need of you the day after. It would be cruel and useless. I can satisfy and save Oliver, and I will ; but I could never satisfy Arthur, and I should ruin him."

" Here he is," said Rosamund abruptly, and ran downstairs to let him in.

He came up, close on her heels, panting a little, without overcoat or hat, his eyes bloodshot and his hair dishevelled.

" I wish to God you girls kept some decent booze in this place," was his greeting, as he dropped heavily into an arm-chair and began to mop his forehead.

" There's vermouth, both kinds," said Rosamund.

" Give me a mixed vermouth," said Arthur ; and Rosamund, seeing that he was obviously parched, brought him a tumblerful. He tossed it off, wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, and lay back with closed eyes.

" What a man needs in these emergencies is whiskey," he said presently. " If you can't run to it yourselves, I shall have to set you up in it. That is, until this pleasant marriage idea of yours materialises, Ros. When did it strike you first ? "

" To-day," answered Rosamund, pitiful towards

him. He was suffering, and holding himself in hand. Presently he began to laugh.

"Fool, fool, fool that I've been!" he cried. "*I* was the Big Noise—*I* was the Man that Mattered—*I* was going to compel what I wanted out of life! And all the time I've never even known what it *was* I wanted—and I've had to lose it to find out."

"Listen, dear," she said; "*that* happens to everybody. You're strong enough to bear *that*. The whole thing's much queerer and more complicated—anyway, if Isabel is right; and you must listen to what she believes. *She* believes that it wasn't me you loved specially, or her—it was the two of us together; and whichever of us had been lost to you, that would have seemed to you the one you couldn't bear to lose. It isn't really, honestly, that you love and need me as much as you think: it is that you've got yourself into a spiritual mess by wanting something it wasn't natural or possible for you to have—and, once you've faced up to the mess, you'll be able to get out of it."

"That's Isabel's theory, is it?" said Arthur, looking round at the elder sister with a queer quick suspicious look, like that of an animal testing a trap.

"It's the truth," said Isabel, looking away from him.

Arthur laughed again.

"Well," he said, "it's a comic view of me, and it involves a comic view of life. I'm not saying that's any reason why it shouldn't be true. But if I've been wanting both, and been deprived of one, doesn't Isabel's theory lead me to the other? Are *you* going to take me and comfort me, Isabel?"

Neither girl could look at him. Rosamund tried to speak, and failed. Isabel said :

" Arthur, to-day, Rosamund got engaged to young Oliver Heyday, and *I* got engaged to his father. It sounds absurd, but it's what we had to do."

Arthur got up and looked at them in turn, frowning and puzzled. They could see that he was trembling terribly from head to foot. Then he went to the door, and let himself out without noise.

# CHAPTER VII

## ARTHUR LEAVES HOME

To many men, disappointment comes as a relief. Anyway, they feel, they are out of *that* race : they can cease the trouble of training : they can relax and enjoy themselves ! To others, it is a spur—if they cannot have one thing, at least they will have another ! But to Arthur there was, in his overwhelming loss of what he now for the first time saw as necessary to himself, nothing to console and nothing to urge forward. What he desired in other connections, he would still have. But it would mean, henceforward, so very little ! Isabel was to have been the centre, the purpose, the singing air that carried the harmonies—yet was she ? What, then, of Rosamund ? It is an experience we are always meeting, and never accepting, that we are blind to the obvious until too late. If anybody had told Arthur, in any of the twenty years of his life after he was eight years old, that Rosamund was as essential to him as Isabel—that she was perhaps even more essential—he would have easily disbelieved ; yet when, on the telephone and suddenly, she told him that she was going to marry somebody else, the blow was so heavy that he could scarcely draw breath after its infliction. The subsequent talk with the two girls was nightmare upon nightmare. He was almost

beyond suffering, so completely was he beyond understanding.

When he got home that night, he stood for a little while in the hall of his father's house, looking round and realising how long his whole method of life had disgusted him. Then he went into the dining-room, unlocked the tantalus and found a syphon of soda-water. With the whiskey in one hand and the soda-water in the other, he climbed to his bedroom, locked himself in, gave himself a large drink, and then another, and lay down on his bed. Getting up almost immediately, he drank again. At last, a glow of indifference began to spread through his veins. Naturally temperate, not from conviction—indeed, he hated the ideal of abstinence and athletic fitness, because his father stood for it—but because of the native vigour in his veins, he could at times find enormous relief in deliberate excess. His attitude to both drink and sex was of a piece with his attitude to the rest of life. He raved against the notion that one should control oneself; but, without knowing what he wanted, he knew what he did not want. The casual pleasures of the senses made no appeal to him: he was too busy, or too vague, or too cross, at any suggestive moment. Now, however, he realised that, if he was to think clearly afterwards, he had better stop trying to think amid such confusions of despair as made thought impossible; and very soon he was drunk, asleep on his bed with his clothes on.

He woke dry-mouthed, sick and shuddering, but perfectly clear as to conduct. After a cold bath and a shave, he went down to his father's surgery and demanded a pick-me-up.

"Drunk last night?" asked the doctor, mixing, with science and conscience, something relevantly strong.

"You go and look at what's left in the tantalus," said Arthur, who never attempted to defend fortifications already fallen to the enemy. "And, by the way, Dad, I'm leaving home to-morrow."

"Naturally," said the doctor. "I have been wondering why you stayed so long."

"Well," said Arthur, "one doesn't move without a motive. And it's cheap living at home, and comfortable. You don't expect me to go into more sentimental explanations, do you?"

"My boy," said the doctor, standing lean and serene and handsome against a background of the shining armour of medicine, "there are many things in this life that are a damn sight better left unsaid. You and I have lived under the same roof for a good many years without saying them, and we won't start now. Good-bye and good luck! Let your mother—and my secretary—know your address."

"Thanks," said Arthur, and walked out, generously alive to the interview's aesthetic quality of restraint. In those days, it was popularly said that middle-class flats were unobtainable in London; but Arthur had got a flat within six hours. It was not a nice one, and he did not like it, and the rent was exorbitant and the premium comic in its immensity; but there it was—he paid the premium, and moved in his few sticks of furniture and a cart-load of books. He congratulated himself that he was at any rate near his work; for *Sense and Sex* was edited in

Surrey Street, and the flat was in an alley off Chancery Lane.

From the moment of his awaking after the worst night of his life, he never had a moment's hesitation over his treatment of Isabel and Rosamund. That he should resign his claims upon them, his demands, his necessities, never occurred to him ; but he saw that fulfilment must be left to the future. Their lives had been woven into his in a certain pattern ; to try to re-arrange that pattern was agony, and futility at that. The two girls had been at his beck and call, the intimates of every mood—acquiescent in his tempers, encouraging to his ironies, patient of his daily or hourly whims. He could not accept them or use them on any other terms : they could not be *partly* his. And he recognised, with a brain as brave as it was ruthless, the justice of Isabel's analysis. The social aspect did not concern him. That it was "unusual," that it was "immoral," that it was "abnormal," to need two beautiful young women at the same time, and those two women sisters, was to him a matter of the mere wind of words. He had always needed them : he would always need them : he could no more alter that than he could fly in the face of any other certainty. Whether, specifically, he needed them *sexually*, he had scarcely asked himself. That Isabel was part of his general dream, the vision which merged for him romance and all the crazy urgencies which defy and destroy romance, he knew well enough : that the desire to conquer and possess Rosamund's provocative vitality was perhaps, after all, a sharper and nearer thing—that, until the one fatal night, had missed him altogether.

He had been content to go on watching the two grow and bloom like flowers, feeling sure that he could gather them how and when he would. Feeling sure ? —He would have given himself the assurance ; but, now that he saw himself more clearly, he recognised that perhaps half the exasperations of his immaturity had been due to the fact that he was never sure.

He would always need them both. But he was a realist, and he did not play with the idea of getting both back equally into his life. That double re-linking would involve a resumption of things now lost for ever—the old careless, childish good-fellowship, the ignorance, the lack of scrutiny, the unwillingness to decide what consequences must follow on what cause. *Had* his demand been a sexual one? If so, had it been unnatural and abnormal ? He did not bother himself with those questions even at this juncture ; but, before, it had not occurred to him that the questions were there. To Rosamund's alert and impudent rationalism, it might easily have occurred ; to Isabel's unintimidated and virgin wisdom, it had occurred in fact ; but Arthur's egoism ignored obstacles as long as it was possible for them to be ignored.

That egoism had, however, the quality of its offensiveness. It was conjoined with courage. If the obstacles were irremovable, they were to be recognised. Arthur saw clearly that he had been living in a fool's paradise ; and he had no taste for continuing to be a fool. " Unnatural," " immoral," or whatnot, it was at least practically impossible to enjoy the twofold sense of possession he had enjoyed before. Which, then ?—which of his two dreams, of his two

desires, was to be abandoned, and which fulfilled? Quite without hesitation, without words, without formulation of question or answer, he knew that he would abandon neither hunting, but that he must content himself with winning one victim at a time. So strangely had one night's anguish worked upon him, that those who till then had been his dearest friends had become, in his heart if not in his mind, potential victims. He must win them one by one, but he must win them.

Rosamund, he thought, first. Rosamund was wholesomely in love, as was proper to her age and opportunities; but such romanticisms, he told himself, did not last! With Isabel, he fancied he was involved in a larger issue. There was an ultimate obstinacy there, a sense of eternity, the remorseless quality of kindness. But he did not despair. Meanwhile, he faced the problem of the two Heydays. Arthur, settled in his flat, went down the next day to his office almost refreshed.

There is an enormous difference in technique and atmosphere between daily and weekly journalism. The daily paper is turned out at a speed which precludes deliberation: in no other profession have decisions so vital, involving such big results, to be taken at so short a notice. The editor, the assistant-editor, the leader-writer, the news-editor, the chief sub-editor, to say nothing of their skilled subordinates, have to have a view on everything, and at a moment's warning; those grave diurnal judgments, rich in knowledge of the world's doings and in the skill to make knowledge understandable and apt, are necessarily produced in an atmosphere of heat and

hurry. The knowledge has to be accumulated beforehand, and applied on the instant to any of the incredible novelties that crop up about the globe. From correspondents and special correspondents, by wire and wireless, through agencies and instruments the most complex and diverse, news pours into a newspaper office not in streams but in seas ; and any single item may make or mar. To miss it may be disastrous ; to print it may be libellous ; to acknowledge its importance may, at the least, involve the entire reorganisation of a paper to whose composition a day of frantic toil has already been devoted. And the machines are always waiting ; and, after the machines, the trains.

By comparison with these frantic and continuous emergencies, a weekly paper, except on the actual day of going to press, is a place of comparative calm. News cannot in any case travel hot to the reader : there is time therefore to turn it over and take stock of it. There is of course the balancing disadvantage, that one may go to press on Thursday and find the week's convulsion happening on Friday ; but at least, on Monday and Tuesday one can live !

On this particular morning, Arthur found old Heyday already established in the office, a mass of proofs in front of him, and a whiskey-bottle open on the table.

" Have one," said the old man without looking up. He pushed the bottle towards Arthur, who went to a cupboard in the corner, found a glass for himself, and mixed a stiffish drink.

" Starting early this morning ? " he asked, with a note of satire.

"Yes, yes," said Oliver, still distracted. "This is one of the working days, laddie. If work's worth beginning at all, it's worth beginning early."

"I didn't mean that," said Arthur, and pointed to the bottle.

Old Oliver laid down his pen and looked keenly at his editor.

"Arthur, my boy," he said presently, "you know my habits. I'm not accustomed to having them criticised, especially by boys young enough to be my sons. My contract with this blasted paper of yours is to get certain work done, and I do it better on whiskey than most people would, with whiskey or without. But, as a matter of fact, this is the last time you'll ever see me sitting and boozing like this. I'll take you into my confidence, Arthur—you deserve it, because it's you that have put me in the way of happiness. *You* didn't think I should ever be happy again, did you?"

"I'm not given to speculating about other people's happiness," said Arthur with his usual brutality. "But, since you ask me, no, it never struck me that you were likely to be happy. It doesn't strike me now."

"Cast your mind," replied Oliver tranquilly, "to your little friend Isabel, to whom you introduced me. Doesn't she seem to you the sort of woman that might make any man happy?"

"No," said Arthur. "I doubt if she could make anybody happy: she's much too keen on making everybody happy. But what about her?"

"I'm going to marry her," said old Oliver.

"I know it," said Arthur savagely, "and I won't

tell you what I think about it. But can't you think about it yourself? Can't you *see* yourself? Good God, man, go and look in the glass, and then consider what you're asking that exquisite child to do."

Oliver's eyes became moist, and he poured himself out another drink with a shaking hand.

"It's the last, my boy," he said. "You'll never see me doing this again. I'm cutting it out, my boy—for *her* sake. From this morning onwards, I'm cutting it out absolutely." He drained his glass.

"Have another?" said Arthur, more devilish every moment, and aware that already the elder man's control was breaking. He pushed the bottle invitingly across the table.

"Well, just a spot, my boy—just a spot, to celebrate the occasion," said old Oliver, helping himself.

"Can the drunkard change his spots?" said Arthur derisively, beginning to prowl up and down the room.

Old Oliver paused, the bubbling glass half-way to his lips. He put it down, and looked at Arthur sadly.

"That's a thing you should never say," he answered. "It's too easily said, and it's never forgotten. God forgive me, don't I know I'm a drunkard? You tell me to look in the glass. My boy, every morning of my life I'm afraid to shave, because it means looking in the glass. Now laugh at that!"

"I'm not laughing," said Arthur. "And I'm not in the least touched. We've been friends, and, as an ordinary friend, I'd have been prepared up till yesterday to take a mild interest in your remorse and

your maunderings. They're all quite typical, you know. You're not a person in this connection—only a case. And, let me tell you, a pretty bad case. But what the devil are you doing, landing that case on to a child for treatment ? You tell me I'm young enough to be your son : you're setting out to spoil the life of somebody almost young enough to be your granddaughter."

Old Oliver bowed his head. There was too much honesty in him, however much diluted with alcohol, for denial of the charges.

" Isabel," he said in a low voice, " is like the wife I had that died."

" I know it ! " shouted Arthur, suddenly beside himself. " I know it, you pathological old humbug ! You aren't even in love with the girl you're ruining —you're only in love with a shadow of twenty years ago ! Keep your shadows, and a lot you'll get out of them—but don't let a girl be punished because of them ! "

Old Oliver got up, put the whiskey-bottle and syphon and glasses away, and reached for his hat. He re-assumed sobriety, and dignity with it.

" There's a great deal in what you say, Arthur," he answered at last. " But you're too young to know how much there is to be said on the other side. Am I worth saving ? It's difficult to know : we all have our own points of view. *You* think I'm not : yesterday, *I* was sure I was not. But Isabel thinks I am, and she is wiser than either of us."

He went towards the door, but Arthur stopped him.

" Wait a minute," he said. " You and I can

quarrel, if we want to, as persons, but we've got a business relationship as journalists. Was it your notion that we should break that up?"

Old Oliver considered.

"I've been too much bewildered by my incredible luck," he replied at last, humbly. "I haven't been able, as yet, to make plans. Naturally, I don't want to lose my best job just when I'm going to set up a new home: but I earned my living tolerably before I ever saw this office, and I can earn it in the same way again. After what has passed between us this morning, we shouldn't be comfortable as colleagues; and bad colleagues make bad work. I resign; but of course I'll carry on till you find somebody to take over the job."

Arthur shrugged impatiently.

"That's not my way of doing things," he answered. "If we were colleagues in the close sense of day-by-day co-operation, the situation would be intolerable. I agree about that. But you're a damned good literary editor, and you manage to be a good one by almost always keeping out of the way. Why should I sacrifice the paper to my private resentments, or to an idealism I haven't got? With me, as a working journalist, the job comes first all the time; and I shall be glad if you'll withdraw your resignation. Of course, if you're going to be quixotic and stand on your dignity, there's nothing doing. But, if you *are* going in for the high-and-mighty line, you might conceivably think of Isabel."

Again old Oliver took time to consider.

"All right," he said slowly. "I'll stay. But I shan't be working in the office any more to-day.

You might send a boy round to my flat with those proofs."

"There's something else," answered Arthur. "There's the little matter of your son."

Old Oliver's face darkened with a painful rush of blood. This was a subject on which he was not prepared to accept criticism or even comment.

"What has my son got to do with *you*?" he said harshly.

"Only this," replied Arthur, savouring his malice—"that I've been asked to find him the means to marry on."

"Rosamund has asked you?" said the old man, for whom, after the first confusion of their strange meeting two nights before, young Oliver had immediately re-adjusted himself in a perfect relationship. The two had walked home that night together, as on so many earlier nights; and each had taken the other's hopes and purposes for granted—a habit on which that perfect relationship was based. A momentary sense of shock there had, inevitably, been: a bewilderment: a need of at any rate superficial explanations. But, these once given, they had strolled on in silence, past Lord's, where they had spent so many happy days together when young Oliver was a boy; down Baker Street; eastward along by-streets; and so home. They had done the like a hundred times, and never with a stronger sense of satisfaction. If *this* could not disturb them, each deeply felt, then indeed there was nothing to be afraid of! The following day, young Oliver had gone off to his lectures as amiably as usual; he

would discuss practical re-arrangements, his father supposed, on their proper occasion.

"Rosamund has asked you?" he said again. It was natural, now one thought of it; but he did not altogether like to think of it.

Arthur sat down in the editorial chair and began tapping the desk with a ruler.

"Rosamund is one of my two dearest friends," he said reasonably, "and what she says goes. She thinks your son would do well in the City. About that, I have no opinion. I am in the City myself in a small way. I speculate. I succeed. I am going to do well in rubber. I have just been doing well in tea. I have even done well in cotton, by buying mills and selling them again and never seeing them in between. But I happen to possess a sense without which speculation is madness—I know by instinct when to get out. My own interests are double. I invest from outside, making what I can on the basis of very small private means which came to me independently of my parents. (If they hadn't come independently, I should never have got them!) In an equally small way, I am inside too. I am on the boards of several companies, but it isn't I that count. My pull is merely that I am useful to Leonard Lake. If your son can get in with Leonard Lake, he is as nearly a made man as anybody can expect to be in a world that may be going to pieces under our eyes. Lake's fortune was born of industrials; but industrials are beginning to slump atrociously, and are going on slumping in a way you wouldn't believe and couldn't understand. You will find that a man as big as Lake is already moving his holdings round,

not merely from industry to industry but from continent to continent. Nothing short of a simultaneous smash all over the world will catch him : his money will always be where money is. Even the smash, if it isn't *so* complete as to mix us all together, and send us out on to Salisbury Plain as cannibals, will yield him a sort of opportunity. Everything is grist that comes to his millions. He makes this wretched rag of ours pay more than its way. He does it by encroaching on the pornography public, but who cares? His daily pays enormously. At the moment he is buying newsprint—a good thing to buy, by the way, Oliver. The tip won't be any use to you, because you won't use it till it's stopped being any use —but there it is. I always give away tips about the City. Except in the few special cases where early information is really secret, the more people are on to a good thing, the better that thing becomes. For the time being, of course !—as I've told you, *I* know when to get out. Besides, nobody takes my tips anyway, and they help to create an air of confidence. And now, old boy, why exactly am I telling you all this? Because I'm fond of Rosamund, and I want to help the man who's going to be her husband. ' Going into the City ' used to be a career—now, it's a gamble. The City isn't what it was, and is never going to be so again. For the next ten years at least, it's going to be increasingly a place of outer darkness, full of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Unless your son has enormous ability (which he may have) and either enormous capital (which I know he hasn't) or enormous lack of scruple (which I think improbable), it's no more use than a flea in a dog's ear for

him to venture into the City without the backing of a big man. A *very* big man. Well, I'll give him an introduction to Leonard Lake."

Old Oliver did not offer to shake hands, but he nodded his head gravely.

"Thank you, Arthur," he said, and went out.

Arthur hit the desk before him a terrific bang with the ruler.

"It begins," he said, grinning. "At least the little bitch is under an obligation she'll never be able to escape."

## CHAPTER VIII

# PREPARATIONS FOR MARRIAGE

Isabel was blooming and expanding in the delight of surrender. Not unsensual by nature, she nevertheless never deserved the character which was in later years given her by the censorious. Never, that is to say, did she allow the demanding and possessive side of sensuality to determine, or even to suggest, her loves. With her, possession was always immolation; nor had the offering to be specifically of the sexual kind. Old Oliver, despite his reputation, which had been gained from many brief and for the most part innocent and insignificant contacts, had never really, before, wanted anybody but his wife ; and he claimed from Isabel, in the early stages of their passion, precisely what she was best qualified and most inclined to yield. In Arthur's accusation, that the man's love was really less for the living girl than for the sentimental shadow of the past, there was a great deal of truth : no one perfection can be expected to repeat itself. Isabel, devoid alike of vanity and of pride, did not desire to come first or to contest places with her predecessor : for her, it was sufficient that Oliver should be happy.

And happy he was, in a way and to a degree that he had for long regarded as impossible. He was alive again, or at any rate more than half alive ; he was able to respond to life's demands without the stimulus

of alcohol ; he told himself that he felt young ! The culminating and fulfilling point of his delight was—that he was able to share it with his son. They could not exchange confidences ; but they could exchange silences. Only over the severely practical aspects did they come out into the open of language.

" Well, Olly my lad," said old Oliver, with a painstaking jocularity quite out of character and extremely ill-fitting, " I've written to the girls' father. On my own behalf, of course, in the first place ; but I took the liberty of running you in too. After all, no situation is absurd unless one admits the absurdity : we've got to interview the fellow about his daughters' hands, blast him, and satisfy him as to our ability to keep the girls in that state of life to which he has accustomed them ; and I thought we might put on our best things and do the doings together."

Young Oliver perceived that this made the whole position quite unnecessarily ridiculous. But he had in life one unvarying principle—" not to hurt the old boy's feelings." He acquiesced with equal cheerfulness in everything.

" I shall put on my purple gent's trousering with pink stripe, very chic," he said. " But, Dad, you haven't *got* a best ; and, if you had, it wouldn't be, after the first half-hour. Of course we might go straight from the tailor's to the classic interview. 'I take advantage of the momentary circumstance that there are no baggings at my knees, and no papers in my pockets, to solicit your daughter's hand in marriage.' Would that be a good opening ? "

"My son," said old Oliver solemnly, "I *have* a best, and my immediate proposition is to wear it. If I have concealed it from you all these years, that is only because no genuine occasion has arisen for assuming it. I am accustomed, as you know, not to attend the Royal Garden Party ; nor am I commonly seen at Ascot. But you misjudge me if you think I never dressed well."

Going gravely to a large oak chest which for many years had stood—uninteresting to his son, and, as far as that son knew, unopened—in the corner of his bedroom, he unlocked it with a rather large and rusty key, and brought out, first a frock-coat with its appropriate waistcoat, and then a pair of sponge-bag trousers.

("Good God !" thought young Oliver, "this is going to be worse than anything I imagined ! All he needs now is a red tie and a dickey, and he might have come straight from Wigan to the Holborn Empire !")

Old Oliver's eyes were moist with pride and remembrance.

"I ought really to have these pressed and cleaned," he said doubtfully. "They seem to have got creased a little here and there."

"They do, a little," assented young Oliver. He was wondering if he could bribe the presser and cleaner to burn a hole in them, or send them home to the wrong address. "You'll look fine in those, Dad," he said warmly.

"Not too bad, laddie, not too bad," assented old Oliver. "Just ring up somebody and have them sent for, will you ? I'm not a lot of good at this sort of

thing, but I'm told there are places that do you up in twenty-four hours."

Young Oliver went to the telephone like a soldier to execution.

"God send such clothes to me and more also," he said to himself piously, "if I let the governor down over this !—Besides, Isabel's own father dresses like a Guy Fawkes. I daresay the pair of them will admire each other no end."

Actually, neither of the older men was likely to notice the other's clothes ; and the interview went off better than might have been expected. Mr. Skelton had always desired that his elder daughter should marry. He did not like her or understand her. The presence in his house of her purity and unselfishness had always been an unregistered comment on his own malevolence and greed. He might, had he been acquainted with the works of Shakespeare, have echoed Iago's protest : she had a daily beauty in her life, that made him ugly. And as for Rosamund, though he hated to let her go, he was at the same time anxious that she should go before she found him out. He refused to realise how thoroughly she had found him out already.

The Heydays called upon Mr. Skelton, by appointment, at nine o'clock in the evening. His digestion, seriously and immediately impaired by the evening meal, had always begun, by that hour, to express its protests in a dignified and rhythmic series of internal rumblings : he could stand on the hearthrug, master of his own house, and pat his stomach commandingly when it sang an unexpected second to his vocal assertiveness. This he did with

the left hand, imparting a slight upward and rotatory motion, like a masseur, while his right hand was employed in knocking his pince-nez against his formidable and hairy nose. It never struck him that, so placed and so occupied, he was other than effective; or, if it struck him at all, it did so well below the belt of consciousness. His wife, rosy and indifferent, was in the picture. She sat beside and below him, as it were, and darned.

Neither of the Heydays was capable of conventional embarrassment—the younger was free from it because he took life as it came, and was as much amused by himself as by everything else; the elder because, being in his own way a tolerably famous man, he had met all the famous men of his day on equal terms, and failed to be overwhelmed by them. But the situation certainly seemed as if it might be delicate, until old Oliver took command of it.

Sitting, with his venerable white head stooped between rounded shoulders, he spoke in the gentle voice which years of dissipation and despair had not contrived to coarsen; and his spiritual quality prevailed against absurdities, so that something in Mrs. Skelton, some vestige of the soul's intelligence long overlaid, stirred in her and appreciated him, and she half-wondered if dear Isabel were not doing right after all.

"This must seem to you, Mr. Skelton," said old Oliver, "an odd quest, upon which my son and I are visiting you to-night. But the circumstances have arisen naturally, and I hope I may succeed in convincing you that your daughters' happiness will not suffer if you accede to our wishes."

"H'rrrm, h'rrrm," said Mr. Skelton's digestion.

"Let me begin with myself," continued old Oliver, after one startled glance at the place of disturbance. "I am not a young man, and your elder daughter Isabel is a young girl: I recognise and admit the apparent unsuitability of our projected union."

("'Projected union' is good," thought young Oliver, studying the carpet. "Hurrah for Balliol after all!")

"But," old Oliver was saying, "we have been close and intimate friends for many months. I have had the opportunity—the privilege—of getting to know your daughter well; and I believe from my heart that she trusts me and that I shall be able to make her happy. I am a widower; my first marriage is so long ago that it sometimes seems to belong to a different life; and it would be an affectation for me, speaking to you, who are my contemporary, to use the protestations which you would rightly expect from a boy. I will not say that I am unworthy of your daughter. The thing is so evident that the statement becomes a mockery. I am old, and have made a poor use of my years; my credit does not stand where, when I think of your daughter, I should wish."

("Good old Dad!" thought young Oliver, with real enthusiasm. "The grand manner fits him better than the frock-coat!")

"But," the gentle voice went on, punctuated but not disturbed by the rumblings from the hearth-rug, "I may claim, what a very young man probably could not do, to have made a small name in my small

corner of the world. I do a great deal of work, and am commonly reputed to do it well. My income is fair, and I do not in the ordinary way spend half of it—I have no extravagances, beyond one or two foolish indulgences which you will excuse me from naming, but which in any case my love for your daughter will cause me to give up—and, though I am no business-man, and have let my surplus income accumulate without regard to profitable investment——"

"Pardon me," said Mr. Skelton, extending the pince-nez at arm's length, and interrupting without scruple at the mention of investments—"pardon me, but, if I understand you aright, you have a certain capital put by which you would be glad to turn to profit. Now it so happens," said Mr. Skelton, clearing his throat, "it so happens that I am interested in a little company to which it might be worth your while to pay attention. A mining company, to be exact; the location of the mine is in Mexico. At the present moment we are awaiting the report of our experts, who are examining the possibilities upon the spot. Upon the spot," repeated Mr. Skelton, looking suddenly at young Oliver, who looked suddenly back at the carpet. "Our preliminary prospectus, however," said Mr. Skelton, warming to his work, and beating first his nose and then the air quite brutally with the pince-nez, "is almost ready. We are in possession of facts which render the experts' actual report—though of course, as a matter of correctness, we shall receive it before we publicly invite the co-operation of the ordinary investor—a mere work of supererogation. The mine, which is

in fact a copper-mine, may justly be described as literally a gold-mine. Literally a gold-mine !—That, in fact," said Mr. Skelton, with satisfaction, " is how it will be described in the prospectus."

Old Oliver, who had been listening to the oration with the wide eyes of incredulity, started at this point and shuddered visibly.

" Really," he said, looking anxiously round to his son for protection—" really, I know so little of these things. My interests have lain in a different field. There is, I believe, a certain accumulation at my bank ; and it grows, insensibly, as it were, it grows. I remember, when I was a young man, feeling it my duty to read the *Capital* of Karl Marx—a remarkable work, but very obscure ; and founded to a certain extent, I remember thinking, on a misapprehension of the Hegelian dialectic—— Perhaps," said old Oliver humbly, still looking at his son, " I am mistaken about that ; but I recall very vividly the phrase : ' The law of capitalist accumulation.' A good phrase, as it still seems to my understanding. But whether it would be wise to invest my small accumulations in a Mexican copper-mine——"

" *Literally* a gold-mine," interjected Mr. Skelton with emphasis.

" That," Oliver hurried on, shuddering again, " is a practical matter, and I am not a practical man. My son, now, is an economist—this is the sort of problem which I should be accustomed to refer to his judgment."

" You will pardon my observing," said Mr. Skelton, slightly huffed, and addressing himself to

young Oliver for the first time, " that in the City, where the daily business of buying and selling is transacted, we do not regard the—ah !—the technical economist, shall I say ?—as an authority on what is practical. Theory is all very well in its way, but we do not find, in the City, that it has much relation to fact."

" No," said young Oliver gravely. " I don't think is has—in the City."

" My point precisely," said Mr. Skelton, mollified. He turned back to old Oliver.

" I can push you in on the ground-floor," he was beginning—but old Oliver silenced him with a wave of the hand.

" First things first," he said gently. " May I take it that you advance no objection to my marriage with your daughter ? Good ! I of course do not expect a settlement—none, at least, by which it would be possible for me personally to benefit. I shall immediately insure my life ; but, since—largely through my own fault—it cannot be considered what is called a ' good ' life, I shall be grateful if you will make some provision for your daughter, over and above her presumable share of my own small capital in the event of my early death. That is all I have to say."

A cunning and uneasy look had come into Mr. Skelton's eyes at the mere mention of the word " settlement." His affairs were at no time in such a state that he cared to tie up capital. " Have it," one of his maxims ran, " where you can lay your hands on it " ; and, in laying hands, he frequently forbore to let his right hand know what his left hand was

doing. If there was one word in the English language that he hated, the word was " auditor."

" I don't think," he replied, frowning, " that a settlement of any kind is the best way of meeting that precise—ah !—difficulty. (H'rrrm, h'rrrm!) I think perhaps it had better be left as an understood thing that, in the event of any unforeseen misfortune, my daughter can always continue to regard this house as her home. It has not been my habit to keep her or her sister short of money. I should be prepared to consider continuing their allowances " (both Olivers shook their heads)—" and, naturally, I have made ample provision for them in my will. Ample provision, for every eventuality. But further than that I should not feel justified in going."

" It is enough," said old Oliver wearily. " We will regard that matter as closed. My son, if I may for the moment be his spokesman, has prospects very different from mine, and indeed from what you may have supposed when I referred to him as an economist. It is not his intention to pursue an academic career. His ambition is to be like yourself, a practical business man ; and a friend of mine has promised to put him in the way, as I understand, of working with Sir Leonard Lake."

At that magic name, Mr. Skelton's face was transfigured with the sort of look which might illumine the countenance of a hermit at the sudden vision of his patron saint. He looked for the moment holy, and all of him except his stomach was hushed.

" Sir Leonard Lake ! " he exclaimed at last. " Do I understand you to say that your son is going into business with Sir Leonard Lake ? "

"Well, as to that," said young Oliver, breaking in on his own behalf, "it's too soon to talk of going into business. As you know, Lake has fifty businesses; and obviously it can't be certain yet that there will be a place for me in any one of them. I haven't even got my degree; and in any case I should have to prove my value. But it is true that I have a prospect of being more or less taken under the great man's wing, and either tried out on a job or advised where to look for one."

Mr. Skelton advanced and wrung him by the hand. He had quite ceased to think of him as an individual, as a prospective son-in-law, as Rosamund's mate. The whole soul of Mr. Skelton was drawn together in one ecstatic idea—the idea expressed in the phrase: "inside information." If once there were somebody in the family, he felt, who knew Lake's secrets—then it would go hard if he, by hook or some sort of crookedness, could not get in on those secrets too! He was a poor judge of character, and he supposed young Oliver's square and open gaze to indicate the sort of innocence that can be confused with stupidity. He had suddenly become enormously happy about his daughters' marriages.

Later that evening, two further interviews took place in the same house. Rosamund, surrendering the joint bed-sitting-room to her elder sister, took young Oliver into the so-called library, and sat down beside him, on a sofa, with a false air of docility. Isabel led old Oliver to the wide window-seat where so many hours of her dreaming had been done, climbed on to his lap, and sighed away her

sorrows in his arms. Each girl talked after her kind.

"First of all, darling," said Rosamund, "I want you to go and see a doctor."

"A doctor?" said young Oliver, startled. He was very healthy, and therefore very nervous about his health. "You don't think there's anything the matter with me, do you?"

"Nothing whatever, darling," answered Rosamund, "except a perfectly typical male fatuity and self-satisfaction and ignorance. What do you know, my woolly lamb, about the physical side of this getting married business?"

"Not a damn," said Oliver cheerfully. "I've lived clean—within reason, you know. The moderns tell me it's a silly way of going on, but I happen to prefer it."

"I daresay you do," said Rosamund tartly. "So do I, for that matter. But do for Heaven's sake stop this asinine sneering at what you call 'the moderns,' who don't exist, and never have existed, except in the vanity of people who wanted to make jokes about them. The wild oats theory, which you're quoting, isn't exactly 'modern,' is it? Have you never read *Richard Feverel*?"

"Of course I've read *Richard Feverel*," answered young Oliver placidly. "I recall the passage to which you refer, though I'm not so sure that Meredith offered any solution of the real difficulty. Anyhow, if I had wild oats to confess to, I'd tell you at once, of course. But I honestly haven't, so why all the fuss?"

"Because," Rosamund told him, "though sowing wild oats may be a nasty way of learning certain

essentials, it *is* a way of learning them ; and they've got to be learnt. The nice way of learning is to go to a doctor."

" Not particularly nice ! " said Oliver, making a face. " I have my own fancy for going on feeling romantic about you."

" Good God ! " said Rosamund. " And your father the literary editor of *Sense and Sex* ! "

" You don't suppose I read that disgusting rag, do you ? " asked Oliver defensively.

" It isn't disgusting," said Rosamund, " except the bits that Lake makes Arthur put in to catch the dirty-minded. Those are the bits I always read first, myself. I'm a clean young girl, but I have my curiosities ; and I know I shall go on having them till I get them over. So that's that. But I want you to look at me for a moment, Oliver my darling."

" It isn't hard," said Oliver fatuously, and they embraced, gazing into each other's eyes. Rosamund observed fully for the first time how much green there was in Oliver's hazel, and he, how much green there was in Rosamund's blue.

" Do you think *I'm* romantic about *you*, or not ? " asked Rosamund, presently.

" It's the only possible excuse for your conduct," said Oliver.

" Exactly. All the same, *I'm* going to a doctor ; and if your sense of romance is more than a pretence, you'll do the same for me."

" I'll do anything for you," said Oliver seriously. " But tell me exactly why."

" Because," said Rosamund vehemently, " I don't choose to be the victim of your inexperience. I

suppose *your* idea was that you'd get satisfaction somehow, and you didn't care how much I was hurt or humiliated in the process ? "

" If you like to put it like that," said Oliver reasonably. " But it isn't true to say I shouldn't care."

"Well, well," said Rosamund, " we'll say no more about it now. There's plenty of time for taking medical advice, because you've got to be sure of a degree and a job before we marry. And another thing—I don't want *too* much of this sort of cuddling before we're actually married. Do you understand ? It gets a girl all worked up, and it isn't very good for her."

" Yes, I understand that all right," said Oliver, with trouble in his voice. " I'll do whatever you say, for both our sakes."

" Darling, darling, darling ! " exclaimed Rosamund, hugging him violently. " O, and one thing more ! I think you ought to promise to beat me when we're married."

" Certainly not," said Oliver, trying prudishly to disengage himself. " That's another of your horrid modern notions, and I won't have anything to do with it."

" But listen, sweetheart," said Rosamund, laughing into his hair, " I'm so much cleverer than you, and so *much* more beautiful, and I shall do all the difficult jobs, including having the babies—how ever else will you prevent me from getting too uppish ? "

" My dear child," said Oliver, at last wriggling himself free, " for a product of this twentieth century, you know astonishingly little about psychology. Beating you wouldn't prevent you from feeling

uppish : it would only make you feel how clever you were to be able to exasperate me. I prefer to keep my dignity, thank you all the same."

" Have it your own way, darling," said Rosamund calmly, patting her hair and skirt back into decorum. " You haven't a whole lot of dignity, and probably you're wise to hang on to the pieces. But wife-beating isn't really a modern notion, you know—it's as old as the caves."

Meanwhile, in the window-seat of the other room, Isabel and old Oliver were crooning to one another between kisses : " God help me to be good enough to you ! "—over and over again.

# CHAPTER IX

## THE FINANCIAL MYSTIC

Sir Leonard Lake lived in Park Lane. This was seemly and right. One would have guessed, seeing him walk along the common pavement, or descend from one of his various Rollses to keep an appointment in the region of the Stock Exchange, that he lived in Park Lane: one could scarcely have imagined his living anywhere else. What was noble, what was distinctive, what transcended mere seemliness and rose into the region of the sublime, was that he had the offices of all his more important companies in Park Lane too. He was not above making the eastward journey when it was necessary; there was nothing cheaply ostentatious about his pleasant magnificence; only he preferred that, when it was possible, things should be ready to his hand.

With a butler, only slightly more assured and ventripotent than himself, and a staff which presumably diminished properly into scullery-maids and boot-boys, he occupied, for purposes of ordinary living, the bottom two floors and the basement and cellars of a great mansion. But, floor upon floor above, one found board-rooms, secretaries' rooms, typists' rooms, telephone exchanges, the whole apparatus of a central activity which despatched power and gave commands to every corner of the earth. Sitting in his study on the ground-floor, a

plain and smallish room whose one luxury was the deep arm-chair in which he lay back as he thought or talked, he had his private telephone at his elbow, and, by the manipulation of bells and buzzers, could instruct not only the managing directors and general managers who sat, tier upon tier, above him under his own roof, but also the editors of his London papers and even the representatives of his interests in America—could start or settle, with equal nonchalance, a stunt in Fleet Street or a scare on Wall Street. But he did not pose as the Man with the Study. He thought he disliked poses, and he disliked seeing people in his private room. When he had occasion to conduct the specific business of this company or that, he would mount the stairs graciously, cigar in hand, acknowledging the salutes of commissionaires and errand-boys with a friendly smile : there was of course a lift for the use of everybody else in the building, and a special lift for himself, but he preferred to walk. It was the only exercise he ever took, and perhaps he genuinely believed that it helped to keep him in condition : even great men harbour these odd and human illusions. He was seated in the board-room of the General Trust and Investment Corporation, Limited, when young Oliver came to see him.

Young Oliver, shot up, with silence and speed, in a lift as big as a drawing-room, to the seventh floor, was scarcely in the seventh heaven. To be impressed by nothing except the Russian Ballet was the code of his generation : to be unimpressed by mere wealth and size was also part of his natural instinct. Yet one cannot altogether refuse homage to efficiency, even

when it is on a scale that seems to involve vulgarity ; and the windows were so very large, the carpets were so very thick—and incidentally so very beautiful—and the brass-plate on the board-room door, when at last he reached it, was so very small and unpretentious, that young Oliver caught himself out in a sigh of appreciation. He did not fear that he would fail to live up to the surrounding glory : he recognised, with generosity and simplicity, that it would take a good deal of living up to. Ushered in by a beautifully-dressed young diplomat, to whose care he had been entrusted by a beautifully-dressed young clerk, who in turn had received him from the exquisitely beautiful lady-secretary who had accepted him from the hands of a page-boy in livery, he found Sir Leonard seated, a very long way away from him, behind a table which would have looked heroic if it had not been lost in the middle of so vast a room. The walls, olive-grey, were bare except for one picture, and that of a school so modern that even Oliver could not place it at a glance. Next to chamber-music, buying pictures was Sir Leonard's principal hobby : breeding horses which he never saw, to run in races which he never attended, came a bad third. On the table in front of him was a blotting-pad, and on the blotting-pad a piece of paper. Sir Leonard was writing.

He sprang up, however, with all the appearance of eagerness when he heard Oliver's name, came half across the room to meet him, led him back with an affectionate arm on his shoulder, and pushed him into one of the deeply-padded chairs that stood informally about the table—presumably awaiting the

next meeting of the board. He had made hundreds of slaves-for-life by such gestures towards the young and diffident ; but he did not manufacture the gestures for the purpose. He was far too clever to suppose, even with only one look to inform him, that Oliver was diffident. He did not seek to make a favourable impression. He was just buoyant and friendly and an unscrupulous good fellow.

" You know the old story," he said, offering Oliver a cigar and matches, " about the captain of industry who sat at a table like this and always had it entirely empty ? If there was any work for him to do, he said, there was somebody in the organisation under him who was not up to the job. Rot, my boy ! All rot ! People don't become captains of industry by sitting at empty tables ; if they have a moment, they put in that moment working—as I was doing when you came."

" I suppose one can work by sitting at an empty table ? " said Oliver. " Thinking out plans, and so forth ? "

" Then why the table ? " asked Sir Leonard reasonably. " Why not an arm-chair by the fire ? "

" There *are* types, you know," insisted Oliver, always prepared for argument, especially with his elders. " The whole art of caricature—and you wouldn't deny it's an art ?—depends on the existence of types."

Sir Leonard considered this, and shook his head.

" No," he said, " it depends on the existence of individuals. Take myself for an example. I'm a godsend to the Labour cartoonists, because I'm a capitalist and I happen to be fat. Well, fattish : I'm not

gross—at least I tell myself I'm not gross—but I admit that, if I were willing to submit to all the misery of cures and exercises and diets and bendings and stretchings, which make life a hell for half my friends, I should lose a stone or two. What of it? I should cease to enjoy my meals, and consequently I should become bad-tempered; and if I once became bad-tempered, I should be a curse to myself and everybody else. I should be a menace to the trade of the world instead of a blessing——"

"But you aren't a blessing," interrupted Oliver —"in the view of the Labour cartoonists, I mean. Personally, I'm no politician: I'm an economist, and prefer to live with abstractions. But surely it's obvious that, if one believes the whole of the present system to be wrong, then people like you, who handle the system properly and keep it going, are far worse than the mere duds and die-hards, who are so stupid that they help to bust it up."

"I agree," said Sir Leonard thoughtfully, "that that's so from the point of view of the pure Marxian. Have you read Lenin's *The State and Revolution*? You should—it's up your street, and a work of the purest genius. But of course, from my point of view, it's all wrong! Lenin really does believe in the dictatorship of the proletariate; but most of the people who pretend my stomach is bigger than it is haven't got even a glimmering of what the dictatorship of the proletariate means. The British Labour movement isn't Leninite; it isn't catastrophic; it believes just as much as I do in keeping the social and political machine working till the whole thing can be reshaped from within. (And mind you, Marx himself

wasn't hostile to that view, so far as this country, with its structure of local government and trade union organisation, was concerned.) Within the system, which of course, like all human institutions, is devilish cruel and unjust, I am really not a bad sort at all. I'm almost the only big financier who understands your end of the business—the abstractions, as you call them. *I* know perfectly well that a general lowering of wages, a reduction of the power of the populace to buy the things I want to make and sell, is bad business for *me*. But what does all that matter to the caricaturist and the propagandist? As an individual, I am fattish ; and so, as I say, I'm a godsend to them. But financiers aren't really fatter than artists or draymen. The whole method of thinking in types is a false one. The legend of the captain of industry sitting at his empty table is as baseless as the legend of the Oxford don committing Spoonerisms. If you're coming in to work with me, my boy, I want you to clear your mind, right from the start, of the theory of types."

"*Am* I coming in to work with you?" asked Oliver, with a charming and disarming smile.

"I expect so," answered Sir Leonard whimsically. "That seems to be Arthur Benson's idea, and he's a young man who's accustomed to having his own way. I give him his head because he's *got* a head. A rare possession in my world, believe me ! And anyhow you and I get on together : that was clear from the moment you came into the room. Moreover, I've a great admiration for your father. It was a big day for us when we scooped him in for *Sense and Sex*."

"You know his work?" said Oliver enthusiastically.

"Of course, of course," said Sir Leonard. "I'm much more interested in modern letters than I am in this silly business of making money. No—that's affectation: I'd give up the letters sooner than the money, naturally. And I'm not being quite honest when I pretend your father's well placed on the paper: his stuff's too fine, and it's also a little irrelevant: but, when I say I admire him, I mean it."

"What *is* the idea of the paper?" said Oliver, much moved by the tribute to his father, but all the more resolute not to be entangled in side-issues.

"That's one of the things you're going to find out. I'm not going to offer you an ordinary subordinate position in one of my businesses. I daresay you'd take it, and, as you're wanting to get married, I daresay you'd be right. But it wouldn't necessarily lead to anything at all. People have such funny notions of what leads to what. Thousands of them—millions of them!—want to 'write'! They think that if they get some sort of job on a newspaper or in a publisher's office, they're on the way to earning their living by 'writing.' But they're not. The two things have absolutely no connection whatever. And it's exactly the same with finance. There are hundreds of men I employ who might just as well be employed by anybody else. The particular work they do has to be done in every office: there's no magic or virtue about doing it in mine. But what I'm suggesting for you is something utterly different. I want you to be a sort of roving private secretary—a person who'll nose round and see the way things are

done, and get a general hang of the interests involved. Then, if you're keen—and if *I'm* keen—you may become a real private secretary ; I have to have several, you know, but they're all men of much greater age and experience than you : they know some of my secrets, and can if necessary function in my absence. And one or two of them—you might be the one, or one of the two, in time—have expectations of becoming actual colleagues : directors of my companies—managing directors, perhaps : sharers of my fortunes and prospects and designs. That's talking big, and I'm making no promises. But try your hand if you like."

Oliver nodded.

" I'm very grateful," he said. " You can imagine I shall do my best."

" I know you will," said Sir Leonard heartily. " But what I'm going to add will dash you a little, so be braced up for it. In the first place, as to salary. I pay everybody rottenly to begin with, except of course on routine jobs. If you were coming in as a sub. on one of my papers, or a typist in one of my offices, you'd naturally get the trade union rate ; but, in the particular work I'm suggesting, you won't be any use to me for some years, and will possibly never be any use to me at all. That has to be allowed for. It's not that I grudge the money—a few hundreds here or there, you will see for yourself, can't in themselves be a matter of moment in concerns of this size. It's a question of principle. If you are going to be what I want you to be, you must have a fairly violent incentive ; and there's no incentive like poverty. I propose to pay you a mere

retaining fee of seven guineas a week, and let you roam and enquire. I shall want your attendance when I *do* want it, but I don't expect to monopolise your time. Anything you can make on the side—lecturing, writing, and so on—will be advantageous from my point of view as well as yours. I want a man of the world and a man of culture. Is that good enough ? "

" Yes," said young Oliver, after a pause for calculation. Sir Leonard appreciated the pause.

" Well then, lastly, this." He sat up, and the somewhat flaccid figure became suddenly tense and dominant. " There's one point, the most important of all, about which I don't want there to be a moment's misunderstanding from the start. Business is a queer thing. It's not always a particularly clean thing. It depends a good deal on poker qualities—assurance and bluff and not letting anybody else guess your cards. I have done things, in my business career, which you, with your perfectly proper youthful idealism, would probably consider wrong. I'm not saying they were not wrong. I really don't look at them from that angle. But the point is that I shall do such things again—I shall *have* to—and you will have to know about them. Now, I'm not asking you to pledge your honour in advance. If at any stage you come across something that strikes you as dirty, and you feel that you can't be mixed up in it or stand to profit by it, and if you care in those circumstances to come to me and tell me, you are perfectly at liberty to do so, and we'll part friends. But what has got to be clear, here and now, is that your disapproval shall never carry you beyond the

point of dissociating yourself from the concern. You must never work against me, and you must never, in any circumstances, give anything away. This is a secret service job or it is nothing. Is that understood ? "

" Of course," said Oliver shortly.

Sir Leonard lay back, beaming, and lit a fresh cigar. He had many vanities : his chief one was his conviction that he could always judge his man : but it was a vanity founded on fact and experience.

" There must," he said reasonably, " be puzzles for you already. You must know things about me from the outside that you don't understand. Let's have some of them out straightaway."

" Well," said Oliver slowly, " I'm puzzled by *Sense and Sex* to begin with."

" Yes, yes," said Sir Leonard, regarding the red end of his cigar. " It *must* be puzzling. I said, a little while ago, that you'd find out the idea of the paper ; but I'm in the mood for talking, and I don't mind giving you a lead. You wouldn't think, to look at me, that I was a mystic, would you ? "

" I don't know," said Oliver. " I've never held the view that there's a necessary connection between mysticism and asceticism."

Sir Leonard laughed.

" Then you are wiser than half the creeds," he answered. " Well, I am a mystic, and I am not. I don't sit and contemplate my stomach to any great extent ; but I get carried away ' beyond the flaming bounds of place and time.' I maintain that there's more beauty in a Beethoven quartette than in my stomach. Or not ? "

"I believe there is," said Oliver heartily.

"Take a further step," said Sir Leonard. "Anybody who's capable of being carried away in that fashion must possess, however dimly, an idea of perfection. And perfection involves harmony. All the philosophies come back to that. The moment you depart from pure undifferentiated unity, which is negation and death, you get discord. And the notion of discord involves the notion of reconciling the discord. You follow?"

Oliver nodded.

"Bear with me," said Sir Leonard humorously. "I'm not as young as I was, and the vice of middle age is to bore the next generation with its fancies. The fact that I can afford to pay for my fancies makes me more of a bore, not less, for it means that people are afraid to interrupt me. What I like about you is that you're *not* afraid. Let me ask you a straight question. What are the two things in which mankind has most completely and universally failed to achieve harmony?"

"Property and sex, I suppose?" Oliver ventured.

"Property and sex," assented Sir Leonard. "You were bound to give that answer. Any intelligent man would have been bound to give it. Now, why all the unnecessary self-torture? What is there about man's attitude to property which makes him miserable both in the possession of it and in the lack of it?"

"Greed?" queried Oliver, beginning to grope rather blindly.

"No, no. You mustn't side-track this discussion into morals," said Sir Leonard. "I'm talking cold business sense or nothing. As a matter of fact, I could

argue that it's precisely the introduction of moral categories that has caused all the trouble. But I've no time for paradoxes. Anyway, I'm not calling folk greedy for wanting possessions. I'm not in a position to do so. I want a hell of a lot of possessions myself—more than anybody I know. What I'm falling foul of is the savage stupidity which makes an individual want other individuals *not* to have possessions—the idea that in order to enrich yourself you've got to impoverish others. Why am I able to enjoy this talk with you? Because several thousand pounds have been spent on your education. Because you've had the leisure and the opportunity to read the same books as I, and contemplate the same cultures. Your profit is my profit. Your riches are my riches. If you were a hungry, shivering, naked slave, from whom I'd succeeded in taking away everything worth having, the best I could expect from you would be a bite under the dewlap ; and I'd have to spend time and money and courage and care in preventing you from giving it me. The bedrock fallacy is that there exists an exhaustible stock of the world's goods and that we've got to take things away from one another in order to enjoy them ourselves. Well, I needn't be teaching *you* this : you've read Kropotkin and Hobson and Angell : for that matter, there's a good deal about it in Adam Smith. But will people listen, though one speak with the tongue of Smiths and of Angells? Not a damn ! Not a single solitary damn ! The general public hates general ideas. I tried it out for three weeks in my rag—the *Daily Comet*—you don't read that, and you're quite right : it's a nasty production—and I lost forty thousand a

day circulation. So I had the notion of beginning with the sixpenny public. After all, if you've got sixpence, you don't want to see it go bang. And I'm making a new fortune by selling sixpenny stuff to the public which has previously refused to run to more than twopence. That's where the sense comes in : and now for the sex."

" I'm waiting," said Oliver smiling. " So far, I agree with you, but I don't begin to see the mysticism."

" Sex and mysticism, mysticism and sex—they usually arrive together, my boy," said Sir Leonard jovially. " Has it never struck you that the world torments and destroys itself over sex in exactly the same way as it does over material property ? And that you won't get harmony in the one until you get it in the other ? "

" I can't say it has," said Oliver modestly. " I haven't thought about sex very much, really—I mean, beyond limericks and funny stories."

" Well, think," said Sir Leonard, enjoying himself thoroughly. " Think what this fat-headed, half-witted beast of public opinion has done—not here and now, mind you, in twentieth century London, which you might expect to be degenerate anyway—but everywhere, at all times, with exceptions so few that we needn't bother about them. (You've studied anthropology ? No ? You should.) In every civilisation, in every state of savagery ! It has taken a perfectly simple, healthy, delightful, necessary and universal act, and, instead of thanking God that something so necessary *should* be so delightful, it has surrounded that act with taboos and fetiches and

prohibitions beyond the imagination of a madman. It has, in short, introduced the property idea. It has staked out claims which mean misery both ways—misery if they are fulfilled, misery if they are denied ! It has kept all the discords and banished all the hope of harmony. The mistake is precisely the same as in the other case—the fallacy is that the supply of sexual happiness is exhaustible, and that the individual can't get his own whack without making some other poor devil go without."

"But," said Oliver, troubled, "where is all this going to lead you ? Do you mean that the relationship of sex isn't a private and special one ? Do you want us to behave like the beasts of the field ? "

"I don't know much about the social habits of the beasts of the field," answered Sir Leonard, "but, from what little I have observed of them, I should say they were almost as beastly as human beings. No, my boy, I'm not advocating promiscuity—I'm advocating Shelley——

> *Love is like understanding, that grows bright*
> *Gazing on many truths.*

What we've got at present is very like promiscuity, and not even a clean straightforward one at that—a dirty, furtive, ashamed sort of promiscuity. I don't think people would be promiscuous if they were free. At any rate, the first thing to do is to get rid of shame ; and shame goes with private possession. Do you catch the mysticism now ? I look forward to a world which will create wealth and happiness by sharing them. I call that a mystic vision, and you can call it what you damn well please."

He rose, benevolent and florid, and shook Oliver's hand in farewell.

"Think of me as a mystic if you can, dear boy," he said. "It gives me pleasure." And he rang one of his innumerable bells. He had omitted to explain the semi-pornographic side of *Sense and Sex*.

# CHAPTER X

## MARRIAGE AND MONEY

The difficulty of domicile was settled characteristically by the Heydays, father and son. Old Oliver was sentimental, by period, nature, nurture and alcohol; despite his fineness in the choice of words when he was writing, he could not for the life of him help thinking of his home with his new wife as a "little" home, or of his wife herself as a "little" woman, though she was a tall one : barely he stopped short of calling, in the dreadful recesses of his self-communings, the place where they would live a "nest." Besides, it was unthinkable that a man of his age and position should not possess a place of his own, and places of one's own were difficult to find : young Oliver, realising the situation, offered at once to clear out of the Bloomsbury flat and make way for Isabel.

So it was arranged ; Isabel for her part did not greatly mind where she lived. She gave up with an aching heart the much-loved room where she and Rosamund had grown together ; but she welcomed with an overflowing heart the new opportunities of devotion. Young Oliver, being by no means sentimental, consented to move in to the place from which Isabel had moved out. He and Rosamund were going to be hard up for a little, and the arrangement was economical : the Hampstead house was absurdly

big for the accommodation of Mr. and Mrs. Skelton by themselves, and a whole floor of it was placed at Rosamund's disposal. Mr. Skelton paid himself the rent of it by stopping her allowance. Having made the gesture of offering to continue allowances to both girls, and having received the refusal on which he had confidently counted, he enjoyed the double luxury of generosity and thrift. He did not like the new arrangement, and yet he did like it. He wanted Rosamund out of the way, and he wanted to have her about. Anyway, she had made up her mind ; and he recognised that it was no use arguing.

The double wedding took place in a Hampstead registry office in November. Young Oliver had graduated and entered upon his new duties. He was enthusiastic, and temperately optimistic. He and Rosamund had the briefest of honeymoons, in Paris : it was brief, because he was eager to begin earning : it was in Paris, because Rosamund said that that was the only place about which she could feel romantic.

Neither of them had ever been there ; and they both, in their ignorance and cheerfulness, contrived to miss the sordid side which the ordinary English tourist courts. " Never rush your sensations ! " said Oliver ; and, though Rosamund remarked that this was a rotten maxim for a honeymoon, they did in fact contrive to stand back from some of the experiences which are marred by greed. Sexually, they were well matched—both honest in the enjoyment of youthful ardours, both capable of laughing at themselves and each other without drowning the ideal in the ridiculous. They were in the first flush

of hope and health and confidence and vigour ; and they could impart, to all the little things they did together, that ecstasy of companionship which is the overflow of a wholesome sexual love.

" Take the Louvre, now," said Rosamund. " What your tourist does in a foreign picture-gallery is to walk miles, and admire acres, and get corns on the feet and a frightful pain in the neck, and then come away with such a confusion of impressions that he might as well have stayed at Margate. What *we* are going to do is to visit the place daily, but for only half-an-hour at a time. We're going to stand and have our breath taken by the Winged Victory, and come away, feeling good, before we can get our breath back again : or we're going to look at two or three Leonardos, or one or two Raphaels, or a Giorgione—' Water, for anguish of the solstice,' what ? And after that we'll go out and have a quick one."

" The essence of Paris," replied Oliver—this was on their second day, and they had visited the Louvre once—" is precisely that it is incompatible with quick ones. In London, a quick one, yes—in Glasgow, lots of ones, and ever so quick : but in Paris, a gloriously slow one, savoured and turned upon the tongue. Still, for a young girl, you have grasped the problem pretty firmly. The Louvre every day, and never for more than half-an-hour ! And now for the slow one ! "

They did the conventional things—they climbed Montmartre to watch the dawn from the Sacré Cœur ; they sat and sipped what Rosamund, insisting upon it as vital to the place, called the

categorical aperitive, outside the Rotonde (occasionally conscientiously crossing the roadway to the Dôme); they danced at the Bullier and the Bal Tabarin. But it was in the quiet hours of wandering in the Bois, or the Luxembourg Gardens, that they tasted most sharply the sweets of a spiritual intimacy which demanded, for the time being, neither words nor caresses, because it was its own best expression. The season was not a particularly propitious one for wandering; but they did not notice that. They were true to the conventions which amused them most.

Old Oliver was further south. His aged bones, he said, needed any scrap of sun that was going; and he was lucky in having a friend who could lend him a villa between Monte Carlo and Menton. His physical passion for Isabel was hungry and pathetic, and its satisfactions left him languid but content. He was indeed enjoying something that seemed to himself too good to be true; and he had not altogether lost the power to give himself up, at any rate for a little while, to mere enjoyment. He drank less and grew fitter; to Isabel's devouring eyes he seemed at moments almost to have grown young. But unhappiness as deep and long-established as his is not easily curable, even by the most exquisite antidote; before their month's stay was over, he had begun to be restless. Isabel saw it, and would not see it.

Years later, when her life had become notorious, the semi-wise said of Isabel that surely somebody could have warned her! But who was there to do the warning? Her father disliked her: her mother disregarded her: her sister, who loved her deeply

and passionately, had recognised defeat on that first night of protest and astonishment. Arthur, her dearest and closest friend, had forfeited his right of advice by the violence of his own selfish revulsion. Nor indeed would any advice have made a difference. Isabel was in the grand sense fatal. Her course was marked out, and she must follow it.

Her disillusionment was not, anyhow, altogether tragic. She was not without pride, she was not even without happiness, in the struggle. The gall and humiliation were mainly her husband's. He came to her having known the extremes of life : ecstasy and abandonment, fulfilment and despair. The efforts that to her were stimulating and surprising were to him merely wasteful or absurd. He had lost grip. The years had drained manhood out of him. Deeply, essentially, not only was he unhappy, he had ceased to desire happiness. His love for his son, which, until he met Isabel, was the one thing that kept him alive, had within its compass the safeguard of impersonality. Anything that he could give, he would : but he knew the comfort of knowing that it did not matter whether he gave or not. He could picture himself dead and mouldering and forgotten, and young Oliver going on all the same. The love which asks nothing except the happiness of the beloved is the only safe one ; and, if the paradox may pass, it is not safe. For not all our dreams and desires and aspirations and renunciations can purchase, at whatever cost we are prepared to pay for ourselves, security for those we love.

Old Oliver had reconciled himself to that. It was his excuse for his recourse to the whiskey-bottle,

which he had never envisaged as anything better than an escape. Life, he had long believed, was for the sensitive person intolerable, save by the special grace of a God in whom he did not believe : that this grace should be vouchsafed to his son was his dearest wish, but he did not flatter himself that he could advance or retard its fulfilment. If he drank, what was that to young Oliver ? The boy's life lay ahead ; it was not dependent on dead leaves and withered boughs ; the spring would confidently assert itself, whatever toll the autumn might exact. But in his ardour for Isabel, a different motive was established. He had chosen to attempt the impossible afresh, to challenge once again the forces that he knew to be too strong for him. Life had denied him ; he should have accepted the denial. When he realised that his effort had involved not merely himself, but a lovely and delicate being, whom he genuinely loved, in disaster, he inevitably sought consolation in the very weakness which made the disaster tangible. Old Oliver drank ; that had been the common gossip of Fleet Street for many years. But now he drank desperately and from exasperation ; and it was not in Isabel's code to criticise or restrain.

Rosamund observed the signs, and sought help from her husband. It was the only trouble in which she could not have counted on his help. Frank and courageous in every other relationship to life, he winced away from this realisation. Something profound in him had told him, when he was quite a small child, that a particular blindness was essential. Rosamund, feeling her way, incapable of giving to her natural honesty a scope which would involve her

lover in sorrow, came early up against this blindness, and recognised and almost admired it. To Isabel she was more outspoken ; but, as she had always understood, Isabel must go her own way.

Old Oliver's work did not suffer. Drunk or sober, he could count on himself for an apparently automatic reaction to the demands of time and fame. Nor did his gentleness decrease—that quality in him which enabled him to meet and disarm the general enemies, envy and detraction and obloquy, in the gate. He remained efficient, he remained charming, he remained popular. What did suffer was his love for Isabel—not hers for him, but solely his for her. He began, quite subconsciously—for in their daily greetings and nightly embraces he still adored her —to chafe against a criticism which was not there. If she had been exacting, if she had been censorious, if she had made demands, it would have been better for both of them. Then, he could have yielded and been mended, or resisted and set her free. But in the divine goodness which refuses to find fault there is something perilous and extreme. Old Oliver's strength, what there was left of it, resented that Isabel did not resent his weakness.

The restlessness began while they were still abroad; it was accentuated as soon as the routine of London life was resumed. The devils in old Oliver's heart clamoured to run down a steep place into the sea, and be finished and done with. He had held in his arms Isabel, the loveliest creature he had ever seen : he had sought in that union to revive the dreams and devotions which had made his first marriage not only intoxicating but calm : and he had found that,

between the early experience and the late, lay a whole lifetime of indulgence and abdication. Having dared to look for happiness, he was unhappier than he had ever been before.

He began furtively. He went more often to the office than usual, and stayed longer. He did his drinking there, or in the adjacent public-houses : he thought, with alcoholic moisture in his eyes, of keeping his "little" home, his "nest," free from the inroads of indulgence. But when he found that Isabel, with a sublime carelessness, with an almost criminal generosity, accepted him in whatever condition—when he saw that her arms were open for him, drunk or sober, and that her professions of unquestioning love were entirely sincere—he began to take advantage. What went on in Isabel's own mind at this time, nobody ever knew. She gathered nobody into her confidence, then or later. The saint, the martyr, are at home with their own achievements. To the rest of us those achievements may seem folly ; but there is always the possibility that we do not understand.

For the first time in their lives, there was between the sisters something they could not discuss. Rosamund was critical and militant, but she was powerless. What was there, she wondered, in this disappointed and disappointing old man, that so besotted her beloved Isabel and her beloved Oliver ? Neither of them, she told herself impatiently, could think clearly or see straight. She was locked up with her own indignations, and resented them. In the former days, she would have poured out her bewilderment to Arthur ; but he too, now, was locked away behind a wall of resentment and hostility. She began

to realise that life involves fundamental and ugly changes, that the sweetest and simplest things are assailable by the contagion of corruption, that even friendship withers and even love can die. But she clung, unreasonably and all the more violently, to the conviction that between young Oliver and herself was the one unravishable love.

Her dream of sharing his work had been marked down for disappointment from the moment that Leonard Lake's offer had taken shape. She still thought, with as near an approach to wistfulness as her cheerful and confident nature allowed, that it would have been better if she and Oliver could have had a practical task together. She had pictured them selling, say, motor-cars—Oliver terribly efficient and convincing over sparking-plugs and carburettors, herself the calm genius behind the books and bills. The fact that neither she nor Oliver knew anything about motor-cars had never daunted her ; she was convinced, and perhaps rightly, that together they could learn anything. But she was no fool ; and she saw that to expect to share her husband's roving commission over the vast field of the Lake activities would be to make a fool both of herself and of him. She pondered the situation. Should she hang on, half-idle, perfecting herself in the higher branches of business organisation—so far (she did not blink the reservation) as these can be learnt without actually organising businesses ; or should she just take a job and add to their exiguous income ? Sir Leonard's parsimony in paying young Oliver so little she did not pretend to understand or approve ; but she accepted his forecast of possibilities. She saw that

Oliver might one day—might, conceivably, quite soon—be involved in business on the large scale : though she trusted his brains, she misdoubted his power to push and drive : she thought that in that eventuality she might be of value to him. Only—how to get into the organisation ? He had taken Sir Leonard's injunction of secrecy with an entirely honourable completeness ; not even to his wife would he say one word. She respected this reticence, but wondered where it would lead.

So Rosamund brooded, and, as she told herself, for the first time in her life found time to fuss. Her father hung painfully around, aware of her contempt, hungry for her approval, and hungrier still for tips from young Oliver about the Lake concerns. Oliver was giving no tips, direct or indirect ; his excess of discretion, Rosamund declared, must be due to a perfectly rational and probably well-founded belief that her father was always listening at the key-hole. She could afford, or rather she thought she could afford, to joke about it. She did not know—Oliver himself did not know—that there was a gap in his armour.

" Oliver, my lad," said Sir Leonard one morning in the June of the following year, " I had a visit from your father-in-law yesterday."

Young Oliver looked almost disconcerted.

" Did he want to sell you shares in a copper-mine ? " he asked.

" Better than that, my boy, better than that ! He wanted me to go on the Board."

Oliver could not control a gasp.

" I didn't know the old rascal had it in him ! "

he said, with a touch of admiration. " And I must have done him another injustice, too. I've been hearing about that mine for months, and I never believed it existed."

" I don't think it does," said Sir Leonard seriously. " All the more need to create public confidence in the Board, you know. That's finance."

" But," said Oliver, " quite apart from the cheek of butting in on my name, which I suppose is how he got at you, the man must take you for an idiot. Does he imagine people get to your sort of position *via* non-existent copper-mines ? "

" Literally, gold-mines ! " said Sir Leonard whimsically. " No, I don't think he takes me for an idiot. I think he is just plain desperate. If ever I saw prison in a shark's eye, I saw it in his."

" Good God ! " said Oliver. His heart added : " Poor Rosamund ! ", but about that aspect he could not with decency speak aloud. Besides, he had to acknowledge to himself that he did not know how much, or how little, Rosamund would really mind.

" I bought that literal gold-mine," said Sir Leonard casually : he could not resist these little effects. " Lock, stock and barrel—rights, concessions, charters, goodwill, flotsam and jetsam, barratry and mayhem—and the experts' expert opinion thrown in —for ten thousand pounds down. It's the last that anybody will ever hear of it."

The effect was greater than the artist could have hoped. Oliver goggled at him.

" You mean," he said in a hushed voice, " you gave him ten thousand pounds to keep him out of gaol ? "

"That's putting it rather strongly," replied Sir Leonard. "I should prefer to say—to keep him out of gaol for a little while! That sort always ends there, sooner or later. Don't mention anything to your wife about it."

"No," said Oliver, actually over-awed.

"And by the way," Sir Leonard went on, still carefully casual, "I have a little thing of my own on—literally a gold-mine, of course; but, metaphorically speaking, a question of striking oil. I'm angling (what a very metaphorical language ours is!) for a concession in a corner of the Balkans which I can't pronounce—but come upstairs and I'll show it you on the map."

They walked up, slow and silent, their feet sinking into the prodigious stair-carpets. In a big and empty room, whose door bore a small brass-plate inscribed with the legend: "Oriental and International Oils, Ltd.," they found one whole wall covered by an immense map of the world, with all the known petroleum-producing areas picked out in green, and Sir Leonard's own particular interests in a vivid scarlet.

"There's the place," said the great man, taking up a pencil from the table and beginning idly to poke the map with it. "That's the little corner I want to see come the right colour—

*The multitudinous* wells *incarnadine*
*Making the green one red,*

eh, my boy?"

"What's the difficulty?" asked Oliver meekly, accepting his chief's mood.

"It's quite simple," said Sir Leonard with relish.

" All the big doings are simple, in business just the same as in politics. Think how complicated the fellers in Parliament can make their finance measures sound, with their talk about Treasury Bills and short-term loans and Ways and Means and conversion and God knows what ; but the thing that actually happens when a nation taxes itself is precisely this." He gravely laid down the pencil, took half-a-crown out of his right trouser-pocket, and put the coin in his left. " The whole point is, dear boy," he said, " it's the same pair of trousers ! " At this he laughed heartily, and began to slap Oliver on the back ; but, changing his mind, picked up the pencil again and did some more damage to the Balkans. He was in the highest spirits. The reason was that he was in danger.

" You've heard of a gentleman, an American gentleman, called Fileman ? " he asked presently.

" Alexander Fileman ? " said Oliver. " Yes, naturally I've heard of him." It was, he reflected, like being asked if one had heard of Henry Ford.

" Well," said Sir Leonard, stabbing with the pencil, " he's after *that*."

" Is it a plain question of bidding against each other for the concession ? " said Oliver, puzzled,

" No, no," said Sir Leonard, happier and happier. " Not quite so simple as *that* ! You see, my spies—I beg your pardon, my experts—are cleverer than Fileman's. *I* know something about the potentialities of that oil-field that Fileman hasn't woken up to. It's like the copper-mine, only the other way round—the stuff *is* there, and much more so, and then some on top of that. If I can complete the deal

before the other feller gets wise, I make millions. But these Slavs will argue so ! And then there's another trouble. The sum wanted down is so big that I'm having difficulty in raising it—I mean, without disturbing the markets too much, and setting people asking questions and answering them. I've taken the usual short cut—I'm raising loans that, unless I do pull off the deal, it will be very awkward to repay. You can see for yourself, it's a gamble as well as a race. If Fileman got hold of the facts, it would pay him to run the price up right beyond my capacity to cope with it. I have the advantage in knowledge, but he's well ahead in sheer brute wealth."

"And then"—Oliver was feeling his way—"you'd be caught short?"

"Why, no, not exactly," said Sir Leonard, squaring his shoulders. "The world's too big, and too complex. You can't *really* corner a man as rich as I am. I can always raise whatever I've got to have—somehow, and at some price. But it would mean the difference between making a lot of money and losing a lot—a rather staggering lot."

He turned and led the way downstairs. His vanity had received its necessary tribute. He was accustomed to say, of all his large-scale transactions, that he was in them for his health, and it was perfectly true as far as it went. His pleasant pinkness shone more brightly, his eyes gleamed more gaily, he treated his digestion and his friends to ever more elaborate feasts, his very step up and down the Park Lane stairs was lighter, because triumph and disaster seemed almost equally imminent, and the fight was on. The delays and concealments did not irk him,

since they were not obstructions so much as weapons. He felt no anxiety. He trusted his instincts and his plans. He also trusted his intimates—just one degree more than was necessary. There were moments when he had to be admired.

Now (even Sir Leonard could not guess it), it was an old game of young Oliver's—if that could be called a game which was played with such passionate earnestness—to distract his father by the excitements of the mind. He would not admit the existence of the vice he was combating ; but he had noticed, from the time when he was quite a small boy, that in fact discussion would pass an evening away quickly : there would, as it were, be no opportunity for many drinks : and, whenever he succeeded in keeping his father sober and happy by this device, it seemed to him the thing best worth doing in the world, the thing he had been sent into the world to do.

Isabel was no use at it. She could share enthusiasms, but not originate them. Her passivity had become a positive encouragement to her husband's mania. Her acquiescence seemed to urge him to excess. The baffling quality in her, the something impregnable and withdrawn, hurt him and inflamed him. What in the first ardours of courtship and marriage had seemed grave and noble, and had called forth a passion almost indistinguishable from worship, now took on, to nerves worn out with misery and dissipation, the aspect of an affront and a denial. Isabel, anxious only to give, found her gifts less gladly welcomed. Old Oliver was bitterly unhappy, and Isabel, for all her calm acceptances, could not but

be unhappy because of his unhappiness ; and he was the more unhappy because of hers. She began to take refuge with Rosamund, to go over and spend the evening in the room of their childhood ; but neither to Rosamund nor to anybody else did she ever talk about her sorrow. By a natural exchange, on such occasions, young Oliver would seek out his father ; there too there was a hungry resumption of former intimacy, of an intimacy too perilous, because in it there had been no secrets.

And that was how, one evening of ugly strain and shame, young Oliver, still resolutely believing in the possibility of the old man's salvation, still resolutely blind to the fact that salvation was needed, still keeping the two parts of his mind idiotically loyal to contradictions, trusting his father's honour, refusing to distrust his father's vice—warmed to the heart by the revival of his old power to distract and charm and help and save—at his wit's end for something to talk about that would startle a tired brain into attention and interest—came, for a few mad and unforgivable minutes, to talk about the Balkan deal.

# CHAPTER XI

## INTERVIEW UPON INTERVIEW

There was one interview, and then there was a spate of interviews.

Old Oliver was, as his son believed him to be, a man of most sensitive and scrupulous honour ; but nobody is honourable when drunk. The rogue Skelton was not likely for long to be unaware of the opportunities offered by Isabel's marriage. If he had missed them at first, that was because his other daughter's marriage had seemed, from his point of view, so much more promising. Besides, he was distracted with worry, desperate for short cuts. Ever more feverishly, month by month, he was juggling with crazy ventures, each one of which existed only to keep the others in their brief and frantic being : he was hurrying, as it were, his scanty cash from till to till, paying the dividends on this company out of the capital of that, delaying, pleading, postponing meetings, trying to throw dust in the eyes of auditors —nothing but a miracle, he had long known, could save him ; he had looked to young Oliver as the vehicle of miraculous interposition, and been forced to recognise check-mate ; then, suddenly, wildly, almost hopelessly, he had pushed for the last chance, the mercy of Sir Leonard Lake ; and, quietly, unreasonably, simply, insanely, the miracle had happened !

Why the big man should have wasted a large sum of money on the small man whom at sight he loathed and despised, the small man could never have understood and did not stop to enquire. The gambler who has put his last handful on a single number, and seen the number turn up, does not, after the first moment of reverence and ecstasy, wonder about his luck. On the contrary, he assumes that it was inevitable. He tells himself that he always knew this must happen—it was what he expected, what he counted on. His luck has served him after all !—and immediately he begins to try it higher. Mr. Skelton, true to type, was in half-an-hour convinced that the ten thousand pounds belonged to him by right of courage and prescience ; in half a day, he began to think that his precious mine had been worth more. And it did not occur to him to draw in his horns, to use the cash for salvage and discretion, to mitigate—even if he could not avoid—the crash. He lied as much as ever, delayed as much as ever, suffered as much as ever from anxiety and the pain of fear—and proceeded to plan new ventures.

As sometimes happens with the mad gambler who has made a sensational throw and immediately repeats it, his luck did actually for the moment hold. Foiled by young Oliver, he bethought himself of old Oliver. Elated by what seemed to him success, although he was turning it into ruin with the greatest possible expedition, he determined on a second push. Could he not pump old Oliver *about* young Oliver ? The chances were that the old man knew nothing. Well, if so, no harm was done ! But there was one chance in a thousand that he had picked up some

odd and useful item, probably without understanding it. He could at least be asked to dinner and filled with whiskey.

Mr. Skelton chose an evening when he knew that Isabel was dining in Soho, and going to the theatre, with young Oliver and Rosamund. "You neglect your poor husband," he said to his elder daughter, grimacing at her in a horrible parody of good-fellowship—"we must have him round here and cheer him up! We haven't seen enough of him, your mother and I, since your marriage. A charming fellow! Splendid! But then he and I are both so busy—on different lines, of course: on different lines! But on Tuesday he must feed with us here—just quietly, the three of us. I insist upon it, I absolutely insist!"

Isabel looked at him gravely. She was too sensible to accept his geniality at its face value. Was he going to try to entrap an investment? But he had been trying this from the start, and she knew that her husband, even when not sober, was obstinate to leave all such matters in his son's hands. She could not very well refuse on his behalf, and old Oliver, sunk in depression, said he might as well do that as anything else.

The meal was odd and rather painful in its progress. Mrs. Skelton rarely attempted to contribute anything to social pleasure. Mr. Skelton was excited and furtive. Old Oliver ate little and drank a good deal of burgundy, and a brandy or two on top of it. At half-past nine the two men retired to what Mr. Skelton called his study, while Mrs. Skelton placidly occupied the drawing-room alone. She preferred

it so, but did not suspect that she preferred it. She read a novel for a little while, and then sewed.

Mr. Skelton got out the whiskey and soda and the cigars. He unbuttoned the two bottom buttons of his waistcoat and the top button of his trousers.

"Now then," he said, "we can relax and enjoy ourselves!"

He mixed the drinks, pushed forward the arm-chairs, fussed to-and-fro. He rubbed his hands to-gether, walked about, sat down and got up again, tapped his nose with his pince-nez, rumbled, cleared his throat, took a sip at his whiskey. Old Oliver, sadly indifferent, sat and drank. It was not long before he was ready for his second glass. When the third was half-drained, Mr. Skelton suddenly gave a sigh of relief and settled himself for conversation. He had done business with intoxicated men before, and he knew the signs when his victim was delivered into his hands.

"It's been a very great pleasure to us—to my wife and myself," he said—"to have your son living in the house. A delightful boy! Altogether delightful! And bound to go far—I'm sure of it."

"He's the best lad in the world," said old Oliver thickly. The maudlin tears came into his eyes. "There's never been a son like him—never! There hasn't been a cross word between us since he was born. Not one cross word! And he bears with his old father—he's patient, and kind, and not afraid of showing his affection. He's the best son any man ever had."

He sighed, and drank.

"And you've been a good father to *him*," said Mr.

Skelton portentously. "Good fathers make good children. My own children, I venture to think, are excellent examples of what can be achieved by a father's care. And, in their case, I should of course add, by a mother's ! But you have had the double task, my dear friend. You have been both father and mother to young Oliver ; and he appreciates it. The trust of a young man in his father is a beautiful thing."

Old Oliver was scarcely listening. He had forgotten his contempt for his companion : he was remembering beautiful things for himself : days when young Oliver had been a baby, tumbling on the grass : the day when young Oliver had carried his bat for forty-three in a school match : the days when young Oliver had begun to go about with him, man with man, and they smoked their pipes along the quiet streets of evening. Where had it all gone, he wondered ? What had happened ? His son was as dear and close to him as ever. What was the something that he had lost ? He reached, fumbling, for his glass.

" You don't find, I'm sure," went on Mr. Skelton, " that your—ah !—respective marriages have interrupted your friendship—your very remarkable and unusual and admirable friendship ? You don't find Oliver neglecting you in the smallest degree ? "

" Oliver will never neglect me," said the old man.

" But I should expect, now, that he isn't quite as intimate as he used to be ? I mean," said Mr. Skelton with a gesture, " it would be only natural, wouldn't it now, and right, if, being on his own, as you might say, and grown-up, and married, he

wasn't *quite* as willing to trust you with his secrets as he used to be ? "

" Oliver would trust me with anything," answered the old man, showing a little anger. " As I, God knows, would trust *him* ! "

Mr. Skelton, cold-sober himself, was watching the interaction of emotion and alcohol with subtle eyes.

" O, come," he said, in what he intended for a tone of careless geniality—" come, now ! You can't surely quite mean that ! There must be secrets in your life—secrets in your business, for that matter—that you wouldn't tell even your son ! "

Old Oliver shook his head.

" Nothing, nothing ! " he said tearfully. " I have my proper reticences—as a married man, and so forth : there is no need to explain that. But there is nothing I wouldn't *trust* him with—my life, my honour, my soul."

" And you really imagine," said Mr. Skelton, allowing a touch of man-of-the-world derision to colour his accents, " that it's possible your son feels exactly the same towards you ? "

" I know it. I know it ! " cried old Oliver, fear as well as anger this time thickening his utterance. (What was this they were taking from him ? Something that had been perfect long ago !) " And," he added suddenly, with a cunning look, " I could prove it to you easily, if I cared to give things away."

" You don't imply," said Mr. Skelton carelessly, " that Oliver has actually told you any secrets of his business ? "

" He tells me *everything* ! " the old man retorted, striking the arm of his chair a heavy blow. " There

are no reservations between him and me—none, absolutely! Business secrets—nonsense! Why, he tells me what Lake is up to in the City—things that not half-a-dozen men know in the City itself!" (He could hear the noise of the clapping as young Oliver carried out his bat.)

"You mean speculations?" suggested Mr. Skelton—"as it might be in timber, now, or in copper, or in rubber, or in oil?"

"Ah, oil!" whispered old Oliver, looking more cunning than ever. "Things about oil you wouldn't believe! Things the biggest men in the oil world haven't tumbled to! Things that Fileman himself would give a fortune to get on to!"

It was enough. The thing had happened. Mr. Skelton threw his cigar into the fire-place and crouched forward, clasping his hands together so that his knuckles showed white.

Old Oliver's face changed suddenly, and a stricken look passed over it. He glanced at the glass, held half-full in his shaking hand, and put it carefully back on the table. He got up, and rubbed his hand across his forehead. The noise of clapping had died out.

"I do not know what I have been saying," he muttered presently. "I fear I have talked not very wisely. I will go home."

"If you must, if you must!" said Mr. Skelton with alacrity. He took old Oliver's arm and guided him to the front-door. Old Oliver came meekly, accepted his hat and coat, and walked with slow step and bowed head down the empty street. But, for one moment, as he stood on the doorstep, he

turned back upon his host with a dreadful look.

"You!" he cried, as if the word were the name of evil—"You have made me betray my son."

. . . The second interview followed automatically.

Mr. Skelton visited the London representative of the Fileman interests; and, when he was in the novel position of possessing something actual to sell, even if it was only the hint of a secret—or, indeed, *especially* if it was only the hint of a secret—he had few superiors in the driving of a dirty bargain. For the second time within a few weeks, he left the office of a financial superior the richer by a noble cheque. His rashness was thereby increased, and his doom rendered more probable.

. . . The third interview was held in the board-room of Oriental and International Oils. There were present at it, besides Sir Leonard Lake himself, Arthur Benson, Abel Turner, and Isaac Whyte. Sir Leonard was still, or again, but in a very different fashion, enjoying himself. He preferred the role of conqueror, naturally; but he was not unwilling to give his famous rendering of the brave man in adversity. If he had been actually ruined, his composure might conceivably have been less; but the notion was almost blasphemous. There are some presences from which bankruptcy shrinks away, an apologetic nymph, just as in other presences she expands and blooms like a warrior-goddess. Sir Leonard and ruin could not live, or be thought of, together. Nevertheless, he had had a nasty knock.

Though he had been perfectly acquainted with all possible consequences of his failure before he entered the room, and though in one corner of his

brain he knew perfectly that the other three knew it, he could not forgo the ponderous acting of his part. He consulted the tape-machine in the corner, and set his lips grimly round his cigar ; he rang up his City office, with which he had been in communication from downstairs five minutes before ; he took a piece of paper and sketched calculations.

" A lot of money," he said gently, " it sets me down. What it might have set us up if it had gone the other way, God knows. I can only say I'm sorry."

" Who gave it away ? " asked Isaac Whyte, looking at his blotting-paper.

" Well, *we* didn't," said Sir Leonard, " because not one of us four is such a fool as to throw aside a great fortune. It might have been some of our Slav friends, if they had themselves known what *we* knew ; but then they didn't ! Just conceivably Fileman's men may have been nippier than our own men believed ; but, if they had been so, I should have collected evidence of it by now. If the thing came from inside this organisation, it came from young Heyday. He was the only man besides ourselves who knew."

Arthur gave a curious expiration, like a creature exulting, and stretched out his arms, rounding and relaxing the fingers. Sir Leonard, startled, looked at him queerly, and wondered what the movement suggested. Then he remembered the stretching of a tiger, and turned abruptly away.

" I take all the responsibility," he said harshly and coldly. " It was unnecessary to tell the boy, and I told him. He is young, and I tried him too high. I am twice his age in years, and a hundred times his

age in experience. We have both made fools of ourselves, but I am incomparably the greater fool."

"You think his action was no worse than foolish?" asked Arthur drily.

"I am sure of it," said Sir Leonard.

"My God!" said Arthur contemptuously, and reached for a cigar.

Sir Leonard brought his fist down heavily on the table.

"Arthur," he said, "we are old friends, and we know each other well—too well, I sometimes think. I have done pretty handsomely out of you, and you have done far better out of me; and I suppose that is what men in our world call friendship. But, by God, I will smash you and your paper and your fortunes, and smash myself if necessary in the process, before I will submit to being talked to like that."

Abel and Isaac turned interested eyes on the financier. Neither of them had ever before seen him quite sincere. Arthur, unmoved, put a match to his cigar, and for a time the only sounds in the room were his quiet puffing and Sir Leonard's difficult breathing. When the breathing had grown easier, Arthur spoke.

"This is a funny time to talk about smashing," he said. "I should have thought enough smashing had been done for all of us to go on with. I apologise if I was more offensive than usual; but really, my dear Leonard, your quixotic idealism is a little hard to bear in a business world. Have you any reason whatever to suppose that that boy is straight?"

"Yes," said Sir Leonard, "and so have you. You know the boy: you know his father; you know, by

the way, his wife." (Here he shot a keen glance at Arthur, and for half a second saw him wince.) "One knows people," he went on, "much better by what they are than by what they do. If we are going to have plain speaking, let me be plain. Young Oliver Heyday has done an incredibly disastrous thing, and none of us, perhaps, has ever done anything that *appears* so spectacularly dishonourable; but not one of us four is straight as that boy is straight, and we all know it."

Isaac continued to find interest in his blotting-paper.

"You are exonerated, Leonard," he said pleasantly. "You pick your own men, and it is entirely your business to decide how far you will trust them. Certainly we three have no occasion to complain. Taking gains with losses, I personally am a very rich man to-day—considerably richer, I fancy, than I should have been without your help. You and I were bound to join or clash, and I am very glad we joined. Arthur, I am sure, feels the same, but he is a disagreeable swine, and always was, and he enjoys being one, and you used to have too much sense to notice it. You told young Heyday a secret. The secret has got out. I can see that, though you suggest certain unlikely alternatives, you believe he *let* it out. Nobody except yourself is criticising you for telling him: as I say, that was entirely within your own unfettered discretion. But I take it we are rid of Heyday?"

Sir Leonard shook his head.

"No," he said. "I won't part with him. He's a good lad, and I like him. Apart from everything else,

don't you see that he's far less likely now to let us down than he ever was before?—Well, good-bye to you. We know the worst now, and have decided, like wise men, to make the best of it. I am in fault, and I shall hope some day to make it up to you."

He walked slowly but cheerfully out of the room. The other three got up, inclined to raise eyebrows and grin at one another as schoolboys do after the departure of a pompous master. Abel adjusted his blue tie in the collar of his blue shirt.

"Well," he said, "I'm damned."

. . . The fourth interview was between Sir Leonard and Rosamund. He had a taste for somewhat demonstrative chivalry, and, he felt, if anybody at this moment stood in need of that, it must be the culprit's wife. He drove straight off in one of the Rollses to the Hampstead house, and a parlourmaid announced him to Rosamund as she sat in the upstairs room. She had not seen her husband since breakfast, and had no special prescience of distress.

"Show him up," she said complacently.

She played with the fancy that this visit meant promise and promotion for young Oliver. And she was pleased at the idea of meeting a famous and formidable man.

"My dear," began Sir Leonard ("Cheek!" thought Rosamund, quick to resent assumptions—"he isn't nearly old enough for that gambit!")—"My dear, some little while ago, I received news that a deal, which I thought I had concluded with a foreign government, had been called off, and that my American rival had got in. The position created

was a difficult one for me, because I had commitments which depended on my success in the negotiations ; and, ever since I heard, I have had to strain my resources, all over the world, to meet those commitments. I have just got out, by the skin of my teeth, and with a loss which, even for me, is heavy. But that is not the point. These are the chances of business. What I have come to see *you* about is your husband's connection with the affair."

Rosamund stiffened, and the quick colour came into her face.

" You have come to see *me* about my husband ? " she said. " Wouldn't it have been more practical to see *him* ? "

" Why, no," said Sir Leonard amiably. " I wasn't expecting him at my offices this morning ; I hadn't in fact told him about the crash ; and now the news of the American purchase is in the afternoon papers. I am afraid Oliver may be upset."

" Why should he be upset ? " asked Rosamund.

Sir Leonard perceived that he had walked rashly into danger ; but he did not believe in turning tail. Instead, he drove straight on.

" Because," he said, " it must have got out through one of four persons. Three of them are close business colleagues of my own : the fourth is Oliver."

Rosamund got up, fists clenched and breasts heaving. For a few seconds she could not get her breath to speak.

" Do you mind clearing out ? " she said at last, sobbing a little.

" You misunderstand me," said Sir Leonard

tranquilly. " I am not suggesting any dishonourable blabbing on your husband's part. . . . "

" Dishonourable ? Blabbing ? " cried Rosamund, a great surge of jealousy, long held down and unacknowledged, rushing up to make her weep. " *Blabbing ?* Why, good God, he never says a word to his own wife ! If he's talked to anybody, you may be sure *I* don't know about it ! If he has any secrets, they're with his drunken old father ! "

She stopped, appalled. In that moment she understood, for the first time, how we may come to do the thing we most condemn. Some devil in her had said what she never could have said from her own heart, what she had never suspected that her heart could entertain. Honestly astonished that anybody should think her Oliver capable of betraying a confidence, she had accused him of betraying a confidence !— she had put into another man's head a poisonous notion, in which only the basest part of herself, and that only for half a minute, was capable of believing ! She turned away, revolted and desolated.

Sir Leonard looked at her quizzically. " Poor girl ! " one part of him was saying, rather lusciously. " Clever girl ! " another part was saying, with truer appreciation. She had given away more than she knew. Her own thought did not accept, but Sir Leonard accepted, the charge she had implied. His quick brain had in fact reconstructed the whole series of events, in a single flash of understanding. (" They talk about *women's* intuition ! " he was accustomed to say, with humorous contempt.)

" Don't worry," he said, getting up from his chair.

He contemplated patting her on the shoulder, but decided against it—another intuition !

" There's nothing to worry about," he told her. " As I was suggesting to my colleagues this afternoon, one trusts a man because of what he is, not of what he does. This will make no difference to your husband's career, and none, I hope, to our personal friendship."

He walked out and left her crying.

. . . The fifth interview was between young Oliver and his father. The boy had, until that day, remained obdurate in his contradictory loyalties, in his inability to see the contradiction. He had talked, when he was bound not to talk—yes, but only to his father ! To admit that that was *talking* in any real sense was beyond him : it would have been the beginning of admissions more catastrophic, admissions fatal to the assumption of his soul. But a sense of fear had dogged him nevertheless : and now in the newspapers he found his fear fulfilled. He went straight to old Oliver, whom he found sunk in despair and drink. (He too had been reading the newspapers !)

" It doesn't matter, Dad," he said, taking his father's hand, and trying to press reassurance into the trembling fingers. " Nothing, nothing ever, can make things go wrong between you and me."

# CHAPTER XII

## ARTHUR AND ISABEL

Isabel, like everybody else, had a double sense of time. For every one of us, this mysterious companion and condition of our journey lengthens itself out, or shrinks into little, sometimes through happiness, sometimes through grief, sometimes without apparent dependence on our own state, in a fashion we cannot wholly understand or control; but behind Isabel's double sense lay a half-conscious philosophy. She gave herself to the moment with a rare abandon: she knew that, after all, it is all we have: yet as well, in the face of accident or tragedy, she could keep a perspective of the years, and remember that emotions pass. They pass, not by dying but by changing —by being fitted, in fact and in retrospect, to a different measure in a different world. Nothing could be more wasteful than the offer of such platitudinous theory as practical consolation in present sorrow: where Isabel scored was in her lack of words. What could not be endured if spoken may acquire a healing power from silence: Isabel's sympathy was quiet, and almost always of service to those she loved.

In the miseries of the moment, she failed with old Oliver only, and there the failure was already made. The fault was his, and doubly his, and doubly terrible to him because he knew it. He had outraged

the fates by asking too much of them too late ; he had grasped at a satisfaction to which nature gave him no right ; and his punishment was, in the precise sense of the phrase, more than he could bear. He broke under it, he sank : incapacity and decay, long held off by artificial means, gathered their accumulated forces and overwhelmed him. He was not only an old, he was a dying, man.

His work had always belonged to a sphere of its own : it was done, as it were, *through* him rather than *by* him ; he had always been able to seem to be putting the vigour of health into his writing when there was no health in himself. But, apart from that, his contact with young Oliver had long been his only real and wholesome attachment to life. And that contact he had now by his own act destroyed. His mind was clouded, its motions were mercifully uncertain : often, when his son sat and held his hand, he would forget the cruel breach and remember only the fulfilments and happinesses of the past. But, between these periods of peace, he would remember, and suffer the anguish of utter loss. Nothing, he would then feel, had been spared him : nothing remained. One thing there had been perfect in his life, one thing that justified him in living—one beauty to set against the mass on mass of ignominy and self-contempt : and basely, obscenely, he had shambled into the holy place and violated his single shrine.

When the realisation of this broke over him, it did so with a force that broke him physically. He drank, of course, more and more, but the efficacy of the narcotic dwindled as the amount increased. Often

it seemed to him now that the fiercest spirits could no longer grip the throat, or quiet the heart: he must drench himself, he must turn himself into a beast, a log, before he could get the sensation of carelessness and escape. He began to tremble continually as he sat or walked: he heard voices, that from the corners of the room or the shadows of the street mocked him and prophesied despair. One day, turning upon such a voice outside his door, and crying at it: "My son loves me still!", he fell heavily; and, having been carried to his bed, never again rose.

The fall perhaps had jarred some part of his brain, or merely completed the work so long prepared by his habit of life: whatever the cause, he did not after this accident appear unhappy. He mistook Isabel constantly for his first wife, called her tenderly by that first wife's name, and begged her with repetitive pride to observe what a good son young Oliver had been to them. In this fashion, lying between her and young Oliver, with a hand held by each, he died smiling. To Isabel, who was at once too generous to remember against him the wrong he had done her, and too honest to pretend that their life together had been tolerable, the mere physical relief was immense. To young Oliver, if emotion were governed by reason, it should have been the same; but for a little while he felt as if tearing fingers had taken his heartstrings and broken them one by one. He bent over his father's hand and wept, when he realised it had gone strange in his grasp; but the tears were not cleansing or healing, they were bitter and salt with desolation. Almost to the last, this

relationship, he felt, had been so true and perfect ; his own error, and the malignancy of chance (for to blame his father never occurred to him), had broken the sacred vessel wantonly. The thought, the care, the devotion, the loyalty, of so many years had been wasted. He could not see what a life meant, in which such things could happen.

The whole world, indeed, had become a difficult place for young Oliver. He did not propose, in his early twenties, to settle down and agonise over one mistake, however gross a one : he saw quite clearly that, if he spent the next fifty years brooding on the fact that he had made a fool of himself, he was likely to go the way in which he now must admit his father had gone, and end like his father ; but the clear certainty had gone out of him ; he no longer believed in his star, or cared whether he believed in it ; he had ceased to be a boy. And, deeply as he loved Rosamund, her attitude was necessarily a grief to him.

Here too, perfection had been marred, the expectation of the ideal had been disappointed. Generosity and good faith were natural and essential to her ; she never even thought of calling him to account for his weakness ; but the fact that silence dwelt between them, on a subject so vital to them both, was the beginning of that triumph which the commonplace celebrates over the dream.

Oliver's material position had improved ; Sir Leonard had been careful to double his salary—" not necessarily for publication," as the great man said genially, " but as a guarantee of good faith " ; and Oliver, while appreciating the gesture, realised that

the maker of it appreciated it too much himself. Rosamund said nothing about her own interview with Sir Leonard ; nobody said anything about the part played in the whole transaction by Rosamund's father ; it was not difficult, for keen-witted people, familiar with the dates and the characters involved, to piece together roughly what had happened. The mere glow of temporary success in Mr. Skelton's eyes would have given him away : but what was to be gained by recrimination ? Rosamund realised simply that the house in which she had been young and happy now stank in her nostrils ; and that she and her husband must go away.

Between the sisters the situation was not much better, but Isabel lost neither hold nor hope. That early and laughing comradeship, she believed, held the quality of the eternal : the incidents of life might assault it, and even soil it for the moment, but Rosamund was Rosamund, and she herself was the Isabel that Rosamund knew. Fundamentally, they understood each other. She, and she alone, guessed what a strange war jealousy and fidelity were waging in Rosamund's spirit : she grasped that her sister was unable to speak of the trouble that the two Olivers had made—and was unable not because of any failure in kindness towards human weakness, but because of the mere way in which the trouble had come about. Young Oliver might have sunk and sinned, he might have forged and murdered, he might have taken to drink like his father and become a crazy caricature of his delightful self, and Rosamund would have loved him better and held more closely to him through it all : what worked like

poison in a nature so bright and sane was that, on a single and little point, sanity refused to come at call. Young Oliver had told old Oliver what he had not told Rosamund. It ought not to make a difference, but it did.

Over her own husband's death, Isabel had no reticence and made no miscalculation. She grieved for the ruin of something potentially noble ; but she was young, she was burningly alive, she was avid of the future. She had learnt, moreover, that the walls which appear unscalable in adolescence melt like mists when the life outside begins to clamour for recognition—that one is not young for ever, nor safe, nor at peace with home and custom. Though passion had come to her in so strange a shape, and had given her so little of what it promised, at least she now knew that she was passionate, and that adventure waited in the world.

Her immediate practical difficulties were not great. She had the thousand pounds for which old Oliver had insured his life ; he had bequeathed her also half his savings, the other half going to his son. She was, it is true, detached, without orientation : to resume her childish life at Hampstead was unthinkable : she divined, no less surely though less ironically than Rosamund, the part her father had played in the betrayal. But Isabel never worried about surroundings : with fire or invasion at the door, she would have gone on dreaming. That this attitude could be infinitely exasperating to persons made differently, she was very well aware; but she knew also that, fundamentally, she could not change. Her real anxieties were all personal; she suffered and

enjoyed through emotion : for the rest, she supposed, or rather did not trouble to suppose, that the powers which made occasion would provide it. Her faith was not a religious one, and she would have been the first to despise a religion that, amid the multitudinous sorrows of mankind, singled out certain trustful individuals for material protection. Her certainties were of the blood. She began to see, opening out in many directions, avenues that led to fulfilment and to danger. She was alert, but she was not afraid. That sense of fatality, of the something there was for her to do and give, grew and swelled in her bosom.

Meanwhile, there was Arthur. She had never reconciled herself, she had never tried to reconcile herself, to his departure and assumed indifference. She was sure that there remained a sense in which they belonged to each other, in which they could arouse and help and fortify each other : she grieved only that he had had no use for what she was able to give. Of the torment, the rage, the frustration, the bitterness that he endured, she had comprehension : what missed her was the baseness that such emotions could breed. Always, as Rosamund put it, she concentrated like an idiot on the best in others. To her, Arthur was, and would remain, in the teeth of any evidence, the dear friend that he had been before. That he must play a part in her life she never doubted ; but she did not trouble to enquire when, or in what fashion. Instinct had to suffice. It had told her what to do when it would have seemed reasonable to marry and comfort him ; she had known that the marriage would be a fantastic one, and the comfort false. She had seen what he demanded when

he himself was ignorant of his demands ; she had pitied him in his frustration ; but it had not occurred to her to waver. In what way, she wondered, would he change, so that perhaps his need might come to fit her offering, and the pain of separation be abolished ? She thought she understood him ; and in fact she understood a great deal about him that he himself was incapable of understanding ; but her intuitions stopped far short of the reality.

Arthur, for his part, wanted vengeance. It was a state of mind about which Isabel had read in books ; but it was to her like a rumour in a foreign language. Besides, vengeance on whom ? No individual had wronged him ; desire and circumstance had wronged him ; and we all have to suffer that. His craving for domination, for the satisfaction of resentment, would have been unintelligible to her if it had been stated in words. Some of the things that he wanted because of cruelty, she would have regarded as the fulfilments of kindness ; over the things which even she must have recognised as cruel, she would have felt compassion, as over a physical disease. Rosamund saw him much more clearly ; but about this, again, the sisters at the time did not talk.

It would not have surprised Rosamund to be told that Arthur had exulted over young Oliver's error. She knew in her bones that he had done so. It would have surprised her a little (since, for all her ironic common-sense, she criticised still the Arthur she had known, and not the new creature he had become) to be told that he had desired young Oliver's ignominious dismissal. But what would have astonished her beyond measure would have been to learn the further

truth—that his inflamed imagination had played with wild situations, in which he, Arthur, had brought the proud Rosamund to her knees and to his bed—had compelled her to submit to his malicious embraces, as the price to be paid for the rescue of her husband from ruin. Actually, he was too intelligent, too straightforward with the facts, to have contemplated putting the crazy notion to the test : he knew only too well that to challenge Rosamund on such an issue was to court, not her humiliation, but his own. Dearly as he would have liked to break her, to possess her, on any terms, he saw that it was impossible. She would laugh at him, he knew, and his last state would be worse than his first. Nevertheless, he loathed Sir Leonard's magnanimity, which, by putting Oliver out of danger anyway, destroyed a possibility that did not exist !

And then his demon said to him suddenly—if not Rosamund, why not Isabel ? She could easily be deceived as to the material issues ; she could easily be convinced that there was danger where there was none ; she could easily be worked upon to do anything, anything, for Rosamund ! And there would be a devilish completeness in hurting the younger sister *through* the elder, while the elder comforted herself with the fancy that she was being hurt for the sake of the younger ! Arthur, without staying for reflection, went to see Isabel.

She had remained, for the time being, in the Bloomsbury flat. She was winding up business matters, sorting old Oliver's papers, wondering and waiting : the associations had no power to hurt her, nor was she frightened by loneliness. Arthur found

her—it was an evening of early summer, and the lights had not long been lit in the street below—he found her as he had been accustomed to find her when she was a child, sitting by a window, dreaming.

" Why, Arthur," she said, coming across the room to greet him, " it's a long time since I saw you, and I am terribly glad you have come. But how ill you look, my dear ! "

Arthur pushed both his hands through his hair, a gesture that touched her by its familiarity.

" You don't think, do you," he said harshly, " that this business of young Oliver's blabbing is finished ? You don't think Leonard Lake is the sort of man to forgive a treachery like that ? "

" It wasn't treachery, and you know it," answered Isabel ; " it was a piece of foolishness, and Leonard Lake has already forgiven it."

Arthur laughed.

" You little fool ! " he said. " You always were a little fool, weren't you ? Do you really imagine that this business of saying it doesn't matter, and wouldn't a nice little boy like a prettier salary, bless him—you don't seriously suppose all that is anything but pretence, do you ? A mere dismissal would have been nothing : Lake is planning a much more complicated revenge, I can assure you—he means the dismissal, when it comes, to involve public disgrace and disaster ; and he has the means to carry the plan through."

(" Melodramatic ! " his critical self was saying inside him—" but good enough to take in Isabel ! " He was, however, mistaken.)

" If he is really doing that (and I am too ignorant

to know whether it's possible)—then," said Isabel reasonably, " you must stop him, Arthur. You may not like Oliver yourself—you may even hate him because of the part he has played in your life—but he is Rosamund's husband, and you have always loved Rosamund."

The reminder goaded Arthur to a ridiculous anger.

" Stop him ? " he cried—" Yes, I can stop him ! I have enough influence for that ! I can stop him, and I will—but on one condition ! "

He pointed wildly to the door which led from the sitting-room to Isabel's bedroom. And he suddenly realised that she was laughing at him, but not as Rosamund would have laughed.

" You used to be cleverer than that, Arthur," she said, wistful in spite of her laughter. " Don't you remember how much I always looked up to your intelligence ? You've lost that intelligence just now, my dear ; and it shows how unhappy you must have been. Why, darling, you must be off your head ! It isn't *like* you, Arthur ; but there's one reason why it comforts me. It shows that, when you are suffering, there's a way in which I can comfort you. I've always wanted you to want me, darling, and been ready to give you anything, once I was sure you did really need it. You don't require any lies or angers to help you. Come in with me now, if I can make you happy."

She walked composedly through the bedroom door, and Arthur went in to her, but without any sense of triumph.

# BOOK TWO

# APOTHEOSIS OF ISABEL

# CHAPTER I

## ARTHUR TO HENRY

Isabel's *liaison* with Arthur lasted for four years. The twist in his lust for power refused her marriage : nor did she expect that, or think it important. The connection brought her into contact with a world at once experimental and critical in morals. It is a commonplace of history that, during and after every great social upheaval—a war, a revolution, or a religious revival—there is sexual excitement, licence and change of habit. But in almost all the upheavals of the past, even where religion itself provoked and approved the excitement, there has been a sense of conflict, an assumption that the flesh asserted itself as against the spirit. Saturnalia and carnival may be as psychologically sound as any school of psychologists chooses to argue : it remains that they are outbursts, revulsions, assertions, special occasions. For perhaps the first time in history, in the ten years following the great war, an established civilisation asked itself whether repression and revulsion really made wholesome alternatives, whether the flesh and the spirit need permanently be at loggerheads. It was a revolution of a magnitude beyond estimation.

And it brought, of course, the cranks. Like an army of prisoners, long subdued and now let loose,

like a horde of locusts, irresistible in virtue of numbers and perseverance—they came out of crevices and corners, out of small camps in forests and obscure debating-rooms behind tea-shops, out of clubs and " movements " ; they gathered from the east and the west ; they seemed created like a cloud upon the sky : and everywhere they laughed and lectured together. People who preached the eating of this or—much more savagely—the not-eating of that : people who were all for release and people who were all for sublimation : people who believed in wearing no shirts and people who believed in wearing no trousers. Poor dears, it was their turn ! And, according to Arthur, they were at least as intelligent as the holders of the fort of convention, and a great deal more consistent and sincere.

All the same, he considered them a nuisance. He hated a fool ; and, like others of that famous way of thinking, he held as fools those who did not immediately agree with him. If he had got to breathe the same air, tread the same streets, as those who offended him by orthodoxies other than his own, he wanted them to be enemies, not friends. He could not endure the support of propagandists who did not understand what he was after ; and yet, maddeningly enough, their support was essential to his paper. He had made that paper a resounding success, but largely by giving first one school of cranks, and then another, its pages to play in. He had a nose for the cranks with money and businesses, and compelled them to come in and advertise. He started controversies on subjects labelled " advanced " or " daring," got away with them under

the nose of a Pecksniffian law by inducing gentlemen and ladies of formidable position to take part in them, and sold them to the man in the street as a form of spice. Many of the most iconoclastic letters, many of the most reactionary, he wrote himself : he revelled in the role of Satan rebuking sin. He gathered round him bright and cynical young men from the universities, languid young men with wasp-like waists who knew how to sting like wasps : he taught them the tricky trade of manufactured opinion. He believed that he worked in the main for what was true ; he did not care how many lies it was expedient to tell meanwhile. He unreasonably despised the public which he had set out to convert ; and, since there is a combined docility and generosity in the British public, a readiness to submit to satire and be credited with imbecility, his popularity and influence were increased by this contempt. "They will swallow anything, even the truth," was one of his recorded sayings about his readers ; and he sometimes seemed in a fair way to justify its bitterness.

Soon, he found that he could leave the paper itself mainly to the bright young men. He emerged more and more into a larger publicity. He made himself useful, to famous but penurious persons in the world of literature and art, by bringing them tips from the City : he flattered City men by asking them to dine with the famous. He gave addresses, on economics and sex, or the two combined, all over the place—in Vienna, in Berlin—and in America, where he was hailed as a prophet in some quarters, and mobbed as a criminal in others. He liked being hailed, he liked

being mobbed : both processes gave scope to his fretful pugnacity, and soothed his aching nerves. He forced an eccentric millionaire to run him for Parliament at a bye-election ; he stood as an independent panacea-merchant, in an industrial area poisoned by a dying industry, and was returned ; he attended the House of Commons rarely, but his speeches were listened to. He began, in short, to have the sort of name which catches your eye when you open a newspaper, and makes you vaguely feel you are " always " seeing it.

And he took Isabel everywhere—everywhere, that is, except to America, where he feared their open relationship might render them both inadmissible. He would have no pretences. When he gave a dinner-party to notabilities and their wives, Isabel presided, but he never called her his wife. People could come or stay away, it was all one to him : usually, they came, for he did not trouble to invite those who were certain to refuse, and, of the doubtfuls, most were drawn to his table by one motive or another—genuine admiration, literary snobbishness, financial greed, or frank curiosity. The single motive that was lacking was simple friendship ; for Arthur made no friends, and Isabel, always remote from obvious and easy contacts, was at this time absorbed in love.

Gone were the days of Bloomsbury flats. In a world of falling markets and failing fortunes, Arthur, still aided by Leonard Lake, moved westward like the sun. In 1927, he was living in a mansion in Queen's Gate : it ran itself under the direction of Isabel's little finger, for there was enough money to buy

expert service ; and, for the bulk of her day, she followed Arthur's fortunes with adoring eyes. She was not deceived in him. She knew his knaveries by instinct, and would have scorned to enquire into the details of them, or to throw a stone at their perpetrator. It was not an ideal she loved, but Arthur ; and, if she could satisfy him, that was all.

She could not satisfy him, for love was only part of what he needed. Love and power together did no more than keep him active but unappeased. The devil of resentment, of frustration, was still gnawing. He still wanted to hurt Rosamund ; but he did not dare to try, because of Isabel ; and to want something —especially something base—and be denied it, was like a madness in his veins. Did he love Isabel ? It was a question he never asked himself. Her nobility made him feel small, but he was big enough, after the first humiliation, to admit the smallness and dismiss it. And she appeased something in him—something that was more than physical desire, and more than vanity, though those two made up much of it. To say that he and Isabel had found peace together would have been nonsense ; but, where Isabel was, there was at least the shade and hint of peace.

Contact between the sisters, and also between their husbands, was inevitable. Isabel and Rosamund were not going to be parted ; and Oliver Heyday's fortunes, like Arthur Benson's, were growing along with Leonard Lake's. Lake himself changed little ; he still enjoyed ingeminating woe in the financial world, and, when his forecasts were fulfilled, deploring the folly of those who would not listen ; he still gambled enormously, but always on the long

view, and always within his means. And the two younger men met constantly at his table. There was, however, coldness between them.

Rosamund, in these four years, had two children. She revelled in them, adored them, pretended a contempt of maternal duties, delighted to spend her time performing those duties. Isabel would have liked to have children too ; but Arthur would not hear of it. He said he was not fit to bear the responsibility of bringing children into the disgusting world ; and the idea of fatherhood had been poisoned for him by his relation with his own father. Something in Isabel was hurt, something was denied ; perhaps, if her normal longings had been satisfied at this time, she would never have carried through what came to be called her " career."

Physically, she had changed little. Her hair, no longer worn long and caught at the neck in the old girlish way, but fashionably short, was still a wonder of natural curls and tendrils, that took the light and seemed to hold the summer : the clear blue of her eyes was still tranquil and trustful : the habit of short skirts and scanty garments suited her youthful litheness. But for her equivocal position, she might well have become one of the stand-bys of the illustrated press ; but you cannot put " Mrs. Isabel Heyday, mistress of the well-known publicist, Arthur Benson, M.P.," underneath a photograph. Her fame, such as it was, had spread no further than the talking circles. Among Arthur's intellectual acquaintances, she had become what in the eighteenth-century would have been called a toast.

That Arthur was sexually possessive, despite the

theories advocated in his paper, was obvious, and common knowledge : and even those who would most have liked to make love to his mistress were afraid of him. It was left for a very humble creature to find out how easy it really was to make love to her.

Old Oliver Heyday's post had been filled, more or less satisfactorily, by a thin, narrow, angular, timid and tepid young man called Henry Strange. He was in the movement, and the movements. His scholarship had no unnecessary adjuncts, such as depth or backing ; it began with Stendhal and ended with Proust : but what there was of it was sincere and real. He brought care and oddity to his task—and where the latter was likely to damage circulation, Arthur intervened with common-sense. Henry was ill at ease in the world, and genuinely sorry for himself. He turned to Isabel for comfort, and it was the last thing she was likely to refuse.

" I'm going to sack young Strange," said Arthur abruptly one evening. He was in a bad mood, of mingled elation and indignation. He had been to a public dinner and made what he considered a good speech ; had gone on to the House of Commons for the tail-end of a debate which annoyed him ; had, without being aware of it, taken several drinks ; and now he was talking over the day with Isabel, as he prowled half-dressed from his dressing-room into the bedroom and back again. Isabel, placid and lovely, with her hair tumbled about her blue-veined forehead, lay and regarded him.

" Sack him, Arthur ? " she asked, troubled. " Is that necessary ? I know he's no genius ; but surely

his work, of its kind, is getting better and better."

"I'm not finding fault with his work," answered Arthur, making a sweeping outward motion of the arms. "I want him out of the place—out of my life—out of *your* life, if I've got to speak plainly."

Isabel frowned.

"I don't understand," she said presently. "You aren't going to spoil somebody's income for a private spite, are you?"

"Why not?" said Arthur, standing still and looking at her with menace. "Is it unlike me to do that?"

"You could do it, Arthur, and I have always known you could," said Isabel; "but I hope you won't."

"This is the first time, sweetheart," said Arthur, walking towards the bed, and giving to the word "sweetheart" a singularly uncaressing sound, "that you have set yourself against me."

Isabel attempted no denial. She attempted an explanation.

"Perhaps I shall never be able to make you understand," she said rather sadly, "because, the surer I am of something in myself, the harder I find it to put that thing into words. But, when I don't interfere, it is because I have no right to interfere. You do what I think wrong—that means you do what I shouldn't do myself, or should be ashamed of doing; but who am I to judge you? You are yourself, and must go your own way. But I also am a person. And what you propose now is to do the interfering from your side."

"Quite," answered Arthur, standing and looking down at her. "I don't pretend to your detachment.

I don't believe in your code. Even if I did, I shouldn't try to live up to it."

"No," said Isabel, accepting that. "Have I ever tried to push my code on to you? You have yours, I have mine. But when you declare you want to sweep somebody out of *my* life, you are invading something so deep in me that I can't give it up."

"Do you want this little worm in your life?" demanded Arthur, beginning to twitch and fidget.

"He wants me in his," said Isabel calmly.

Arthur exploded. Those ordinary-sounding words blew up a secret mine in his soul. He could exult when he told himself that Isabel, the beautiful and adored Isabel, loved him, admired him, cherished him; he had hidden away from his own recognition and acknowledgment the fact that she pitied him. He would have been capable of wanting to kill the person who pointed out that Isabel's capitulation had been made in response to his own need: that she had wanted him *because* he wanted her.

"Good God!" he cried, with a characteristically awkward gesture of the arms—"Good God Almighty! Does your precious creed tell you to give yourself to every crawling creature that gets lustful about you? Do you want to be tasted by the general camp?"

Isabel could not help smiling. It was so like Arthur to quote Shakespeare at such a moment, and not to know that he was quoting! Half-dressed, undignified, tousled, private, he kept all the unconsciousness which gave him power on public platforms; he would express himself, she supposed, with the same

force and fertility, whatever might be demanded or denied by circumstance. She was more deeply touched than she could have been by any appeal to sentiment. This was the Arthur she so deeply knew.

"I think a good many people have been lustful about me," she confessed. "I think I have the intelligence to distinguish one thing from another. This boy loves me in a special sense, in a sense deserving the word 'love.' It isn't always the best people who love most, is it? *You* ought to know that, Arthur!" she added, wistfully, but humorously. "You wouldn't call yourself good exactly, would you? But I have never doubted your love, and, from the moment I believed that I, by myself, without Rosamund, could do something to answer it, I don't consider I have failed you."

"You are failing me now," said Arthur thickly. The mere mention of Rosamund, in this connection, set the blood buzzing in his head.

"No," said Isabel.

"Is it your pretty notion, then," said Arthur, "that I should share your favours with Henry Strange?"

"Yes," said Isabel.

Arthur looked at her wildly. At that moment he could have struck her, he could have strangled her. He turned away instead, with a violent effort, and rushed back into his dressing-room. She heard him snatching up clothes and shoes, then she heard his door bang, and then the rattle of the chains and bolts as he let himself out into the street. The front-door crashed behind him, and the hurry of his stride was

for a few seconds audible. It dwindled, and ceased. Isabel lay unmoving, except that she pressed her hand upon her heart.

It was not that she was resolute not to yield. In a sense, she would have been glad to yield. Arthur necessarily meant more in her life than any newcomer, nor did she plead to herself that sudden and overwhelming passion which destroys landmarks and safeguards like a fire. It was merely that there are some things you can do, and some you cannot. There are people who, because of their haste to serve what they believe to be a more important end, can leave an animal hurt by the roadside ; there are others to whom no end conceivable, except a sharper call of the same kind, could be more important than the alleviation of the hurt. " Here is pain—I must relieve it. Here is need—I must answer it," is a law given to certain spirits, and given absolutely. Isabel differed from many (this was her case to herself), not in the impulse of compassion and self-dedication, but in the special nature of the service she proposed to render. The fact that, in the rendering, she took to herself physical as well as spiritual delight, laid her open, she knew, to the assault of criticism. But she did not waver: it did not occur to her to waver. Why, she asked herself, should the critics so bitterly, in this connection alone, dissociate the pleasure of the body from that of the spirit ? It is pleasant to give food to the hungry, as it is pleasant for the hungry to receive it : but that does not brand the transaction with infamy. To say that Isabel would have loved Henry Strange, if he had not first loved and needed *her*, would have been untrue ;

but it was true that she loved him; and she knew no argument against truth and love.

Arthur's decisions were always rapid and final. He could cut the knot of his heart-strings, not because of exceptional courage—though he possessed exceptional courage—but because he actually took a pleasure in turning the knife in the wound. To give up, utterly, violently, and to nurse a grudge because he had done so, was to him a deep and bitter satisfaction. Besides, it was necessary that this time he should be the author of repudiation. He had never forgotten, never begun to get over, that terrible night when he had learnt that both Isabel and Rosamund had chosen their mates apart from him; he was assuredly not going to suffer the renewed indignity of seeking to impose his will on Isabel and failing; if she could do without *him*, he must show her first that he could do without *her*. He did not understand her theory: that is to say, he understood it well enough with his intelligence, and could write eloquent articles in defence of it and its like; he was all for freedom where his own insistences were not concerned. But what she stood for, what she was after, what star she followed, his spirit did not understand at all. He loved her, in his own way of loving. This meant that, in the circumstances, he hated her.

Physical energy kept him going all night. He walked blindly, mile after mile through empty streets; at one time he found himself climbing Haverstock Hill towards Hampstead Heath—perhaps at the bidding of some hidden memory; at another, he thought he was south of the Thames.

But with the dawn, a grey, cold, sleety dawn of spring as London knows it, he had driven hesitation from him. He had made up his mind for good and all. No pleading, no arguing for him, no knocking at the shut door of a mansion he had once inhabited ! For four years he had had Isabel for his own : in one night he decided that he wanted her no longer. Let her go to her miserable little lover ! He, Arthur, had fed her, clothed her, displayed her beauty to the world. He had surrounded her with the opportunities of the mind, with people who could talk and think and act ; he had given her a place among those with whom the future lay. Let her go back on all that if she wished ! She, not he, would be the loser ! What did he want with her anyway ? What had he ever wanted ? (What, alas, his heart might have said in warning, would he ever learn to want ?)

Close on the decision about his private life, came a more vital one about his public. He was tired, utterly sick and tired, he suddenly discovered, of *Sense and Sex*. It was futile : everything, so far as achievement went, was futile. The mere exercise of power, no matter to what end, was the only thing worth while ; and the wretched paper no longer stood to him for that. If he got rid of Strange, and opinion could link up that procedure with a new relationship between Strange and Isabel, there would be an apparent pettiness at work. Little as he cared for what people thought, Arthur had flashes of wisdom in which he preferred to keep to himself his own clear vision of himself. On the other hand, it was manifestly impossible to go on working in the same building, on the same task, as his supplanter. He would go

to Lake and insist on wider opportunities : God knew, he had proved his fitness for them !

He went home, mixed himself a drink, left a note for Isabel asking her to leave the house that day, and went out again to find Leonard Lake.

## CHAPTER II

## THE GREAT DAILY

Isabel's *liaison* with Henry lasted three months. It made him the envy, and her the talk, of the clubs and coteries. Everybody wondered what she could see in him ; he, humble and proud, wondered the most of all. He suggested marriage ; but Isabel's sense of eternity gave her a knowledge of the values of time. She did not suppose that her relationship with Henry would be lasting ; and she was doubtful whether she would ever again go through the marriage-ceremony with anybody. If Arthur had wanted that—if Arthur had wanted children—why, even then, who could tell ? In her youth and inexperience, she would have consented ; and children would certainly have made a difference and a difficulty. But she framed no abstract code, and troubled herself with no imaginary dilemma. Each case was special. She obeyed the law of her own personal fate, which so far had denied her maternity and given her love. The rest lay with the future.

She did as Arthur told her about leaving. She acknowledged his technical right to be peremptory, for it was true that she had to a great extent lived on his money : money to her meant so little that she did not mind on whose she lived. She could not go on taking what he no longer wanted to offer. A night had made, a night had broken, one strange

and brilliant and thrilling episode. It was over. The breach was worth tears, and she paid it that tribute. But she was quiet, and as practical as she could ever learn to be. She packed a few clothes, a few books, a few familiar odds-and-ends, with her own hands ; gave some final directions to an inquisitive household ; rang up Henry to tell him to expect her ; and went back to the life of small means as unquestioningly as she had come out of it. The " Back-to-Bloomsbury Movement," Rosamund called the transit, when, later, she came to sniff at the flat in Lamb's Conduit Street. She herself had returned to Hampstead, and wondered why life should seem to oscillate between two localities at whose expense it was so easy and so obvious to be amusing. " Some day," she said to Oliver, " we'll go berserk and live in Chelsea ! " She deplored Isabel's new move, and accepted its implications.

Henry, wistful and wide-eyed, slender and a-quiver, was waiting for his beloved in the street. He walked a little way in one direction, a little way in the other : he clasped his hands in front of him, and his pathetic gaze searched every taxi-cab as it went by. He was as unworldly as Isabel herself, though the world might have found less excuse for him : he did not reckon his hundreds against Arthur's thousands : he did not even clearly recollect whether he had contemplated her leaving Arthur, or what explicit future he had proposed. He knew that he had needed her, lain at her feet, clung to her hands ; and now, miraculously and bewilderingly, he seemed to be saddled with her life. At this stage, he assumed that the conjunction implied marriage : that frightened

him a good deal, and puzzled him too, for in his world it was usual to speak of marriage as a savage half-forgotten custom of primitive peoples. He himself had made some twenty epigrams to deride it; and it must be confessed that when, later, the formal proposal had been put and rejected, part of his relief was the realisation that he could go on making epigrams. Just now, his emotions were so much confused that he could have been forgiven for guessing wrongly which was uppermost. Terror was there, but it was a youthful and lovely terror, of something overwhelmingly pure and good. And triumph was there too. He thought vaguely that he must give a party.

When Isabel arrived, he rushed stumblingly forward to take her luggage, and carried it tenderly upstairs. He looked round his domain for a moment with new eyes, and half thought that it was perhaps rather shabby and dusty for a queen of song, an ideal of worship, to inhabit. The doubt passed, and he turned to take her in his arms. Isabel gave herself to them, and a tide of happiness rolled over the distresses of the past day in her mind, and began to obliterate them. She had taken the third step in her career.

Henry's world was anxious to come to his party. It was agog with curiosity, and would remain so for a short period. Alexander Hughes, the sculptor, leader of the Static Movement, whose misery it was that he could think of no word more congruous than "Movement" to come after "Static"—Irene Evelyn, who wrote those short breathless novels, known among her intimates as "gaspers," about

prostitution—Louis Tremlyn, the music critic—Sylvia Fayde, whose speciality it was to sing touching but indecent songs in a lowing, brooding contralto that brought tears to the eyes of cynics—Edward Pondicherry, who edited *Function*, and Stephen Sykes, who upbraided that paper every month in *Form*—they were all there, and none of them could make much of Isabel. It was like other parties : everybody felt very brilliant at first and rather silly afterwards : several people drank too much, and one meek lady who had been asked by mistake was sick. Henry looked desolately round, wishing vaguely and helplessly that this party might have been just a little different from the others, not realising how easily and completely Isabel transcended an atmosphere in which she was not at home. Rosamund and Oliver had come, out of kindness and under protest ; they discussed it afterwards in the taxi.

" It's all right, you know," said Oliver solemnly. " I don't like the lad very much, but Isabel does. And anyway it's only a stage."

" A stage towards what ? " asked Rosamund tartly.

Oliver looked at her, and decided not to attempt an answer. He put his arm round her instead.

" You'll feel all right when you get home to your babies," he said.

Soon the intellectual world—or the world of intellectuals—had turned its attention to another sensation. Arthur gave up *Sense and Sex*. He told Lake that his journalistic capacity wanted greater scope and stimulus. He was tired of the rag ; he had made

it ; it had, after a fashion, made *him* ; but the work was done, success was now automatic, and his lungs wanted to expand.

" Well," said Sir Leonard, blander and more judicious than ever, " between ourselves, I am just negotiating for the *Triumph*. In fact, the thing's settled : only of course Fleet Street doesn't know, and mustn't know, anything about it. It's going to be one of those ' alleged dramatic sensations ' that we read about. I shall amalgamate the damned thing with the *Comet*. The new Board has been constituted. . . ."

" Why wasn't I told anything about all this ? " asked Arthur querulously.

" My dear Arthur," said his friend, " I can't tell you *everything*. I don't see enough of you, nowadays, and a good thing too—you're getting so infernally ungracious and irritable that we should quarrel."

" Nonsense," said Arthur. " I've always been as ungracious and irritable as I am now, and you're not going to quarrel with anybody that you can get anything out of. I know you have more stunts than I can keep pace with, if I am to do my own jobs as well : I'm not pining for the post of confidential minister behind the throne. But, damn it all, this is a journalistic business, and I'm a journalist."

" That's the reason, dear boy," said Sir Leonard comfortably. " I wanted Vaughan as my new managing-editor ; and, as it happens, I am aware that you are jealous of Vaughan.—No, don't interrupt or deny it : you won't change my opinion. If I had consulted you before the deal was closed, you would have wanted me not to have Vaughan. You

would have found a thousand perfectly good reasons why I shouldn't have Vaughan. I was determined to have Vaughan, and I don't waste time on useless friction. However—no, let me finish ; then you won't need to say what you're trying to say—the stars in their courses fight for you, my dear Arthur, though why they should trouble themselves about anybody so disagreeable I can't think. Vaughan is ill—very ill. And the only person I can fancy to step into his shoes is you."

"You should have asked me first," said Arthur angrily.

"Listen," said Sir Leonard impressively. "You can't have it both ways, and an anti-sentimentalist like yourself shouldn't try to. If there were between us the ordinary affection of friends, then, I agree, I shouldn't have the right to arrange a reconstruction of this magnitude, when it is up your street and under your nose, without consulting you. But you yourself would be the first to call that attitude an imbecility. You use me—I use you : well and good. I use you for the tasks at which I think you are most useful : again, well and good. At this particular job, I thought Vaughan would be better. You have no experience of daily journalism. You're quick enough, God knows ; but Vaughan is the proved best man in his line of country. Anyway, we needn't argue ! You can come in with me on Monday and take over, or, to adopt your own winsome style of conversation, you can bloody well stay outside. I take it that you will come."

"Yes," said Arthur, getting up. "I shall come."

The sensation was enormous. A multitude of

workers — journalists, printers, foundry men, machine-minders, electricians, packers — were thrown instantaneously out of work ; two gigantic newspapers, with circulations of over a million each, became one super-gigantic newspaper (the adjective was its own), with a circulation of over two millions ; and Arthur Benson was, potentially, one of the most powerful men in the world. " Potentially," because there is no necessary connection between journalism and power. The instrument is so huge and capricious that, in unskilful hands, it can cancel its own effects : it would be possible for all the newspapers in the country to combine in a campaign for a particular purpose, and for that purpose to be thereby rather retarded than advanced. But, in fact, the instrument is not so unskilfully directed. In spite of the opinion frequently expressed by people who talk entirely in the language created by journalists, journalists as a rule are neither fools nor knaves ; and, so long as there are various newspapers, with vigorous and contending policies, one or other of those policies will gain ground. Arthur knew nothing of the special technique which goes to the arrangement and presentment of news ; but he had a crowd of experts at his beck and call for that. What he *could* do was to tell at a glance whether the arrangement and presentment were being done well or badly—to choose his men quickly and get rid of them ruthlessly—to gauge instinctively how much nonsense the public demanded as jam for the pill of sense—and to impose his personality. He remembered that, once before, Sir Leonard Lake had attempted to make the *Comet* carry a forward economic theory, and that the

attempt had failed. He did not believe that it need have failed. He believed that the same ideas and methods which had made the twopenny public buy a sixpenny paper by the hundred thousand, when he was editing *Sense and Sex*, could make the penny public buy a penny paper by the million. He had learnt in a grand school how to wrap intelligence round with sentimentality, and how to make the universal irritation of sexual curiosity subserve the demand for political progress.

The only matter that gave him pause was the actual treatment of sex. He was sick and tired of the conventional openings—"Should Girls Kiss Men?"—"Are our Daughters Faster than our Mothers?"—and had decided for a big drive in one of two opposite directions. To him, the question was double: what would increase circulation, and what would give himself the greatest possible sense of power? He had none of the genuine idealism which was so strangely intermixed with the cynical activities of Leonard Lake. He was the weaker man of the two, because he desired mere power for its own sake, or for the sake of the assuagement it gave to his neurotic resentments, whereas Lake really did believe in certain ends, and had not altogether refused his vision. Arthur asked himself whether the time had come for a bold statement of the principles which the vast majority had begun to practise, or whether more, in money and notoriety, was to be made out of harking back to respectabilities. The fact that the latter course would involve him in a denial of his previous propaganda did not concern him at all: nothing, he said, was so popular as a

conversion, especially when it was a conversion to hypocrisy.

" What I have in mind," he told Leonard Lake, when the two of them were in conference with Whyte and Turner, " is the resurrection of the old ideal of the family. Chastity, restraint, self-control, purity, monogamy, the whole bag of tricks already trumped by experience ! We could push every really dirty book by denouncing it, and get the esteem and support of every old humbug who denies his daughter a latchkey and spends week-ends with chorus-girls in Paris. There are millions of the type still, as you must realise."

" There are millions now," said Abel Turner, " but they are all middle-aged ; and the death-rate is a highly beneficent purge."

" Whether the new things are better than the old things," said Sir Leonard, " is beyond our power to discern or decide. Our opinions are only opinions. They may be right, they may be wrong. What we can be certain of are the facts."

" An opinion is a fact," said Isaac Whyte. " In journalism, it is the most important fact. I would almost say, the *only* fact."

" That's absurd," retorted Sir Leonard. " Things have happened, which no expression of opinion is now going to alter. Two of them, to my mind, stand out as decisive—the war and birth-control. During the war, freedom of sexual relations was winked at ; it was even surrounded by a vague pink glow of moral approbation ; it was felt, not among the bean-eating eccentrics of Soho, who were 'free-love' anyway, but in the solidest homes of Surbiton and

Streatham, that boys who were giving their lives for their country had a right to any alleviation or encouragement that was going. I seriously believe that, in the long run, that may prove to have been the most important of the effects of war. You point to economic chaos and a world-slump ; but these have happened before, they have been survived, and they may just conceivably be survived again. What can never, and therefore *will* never, be changed or undone is the alteration in the fundamental view about the ultimate value of chastity. The general mass of people never have been, except artificially, chaste ; but in increasing numbers they now think that they *oughtn't* to be. The second fact is the spread in the knowledge of birth-control. When a girl couldn't sleep with a man without going half off her head with the fear of having an illegitimate baby, the world was one thing. Now that she can, it is another. These changes are permanent : there is no going back because of opinions."

" I agree," said Arthur, " I'm not denying the obvious. But equally I'm not thinking in terms of centuries. The world moves ; but, for all any of us can tell, it is moving to destruction. The indications, as it happens, are all that way : the only reason—and it isn't a *reason*—why I reject the indications is because of the sixth sense which tells me when a market is going to turn. You three, in your own ways, share that sense, or profit by my having it : we needn't discuss it. But all we really know about the public is that it is fumbling and groping : there may or may not be a violent reaction in the direction of restrictions and perversions. ' All these like sheep

have gone astray' ; and all these like sheep may follow some bleating bell-wether into some idiotic fold. They may rush bleating through some gap that we are too intellectual to notice : they may confuse themselves with swine—God knows it wouldn't be difficult!—and rush down any steep place that's provided for them. I'm not pretending to foresee the distant future : one step is enough for me, and one false step is a damn sight too much. I'm not planning for a hundred years ahead : I'm not even planning for twenty : why, in *five* years it may be expedient to eat our words, burn our boats, reconstruct our policy by denying everything, and cross the Rubicon backwards. What I'm wondering is whether there mayn't be an audience, an overwhelming and paying audience, for the antiquated shibboleths. We might get in a period of fatuous false righteousness, while other people were fighting the battle of truth, and then suddenly turn round, while the other birds were still unpopular, and get the kudos for the advance they had achieved."

"I suppose you're what's called an idealist?" said Abel.

"A journalist," said Arthur snappily.

"Don't misuse a good word," Sir Leonard reproved him. "You're yourself using one of the shibboleths that are definitely out of date. But just give us an example of what you mean."

"I'll take the most obvious," agreed Arthur. "I'll take the British home. What did it consist of, in our fathers' time? One male tyrant, imposing his will because he held the purse-strings : one female slave, crushing down her natural desires out of cowardice :

and an indefinite number of rebellious young, bullied and intimidated and therefore deceitful and base. I'm not denying there were happy homes : they were, I suppose, the most putrid of the lot, because in them the lies had become fetiches, and sentiment survived by being false. Well, along come Bernard Shaw and Bennett and Wells and Granville Barker, and show up the shoddy pretence for what it is. They are denounced as mountebanks and scoundrels ; but they win. They win, that is to say, in the only sense in which victory over falsehood is attainable : they are canonised as saints and heroes, and the people who most kowtow to them have entirely forgotten what they said. A prophet is not without honour in his own country. What a prophet is without is an honest following. Shaw is in all the headlines for family reading—and, mind you, the headlines *are* the family reading—but, go to the families and say in your own words what Shaw has said about them, and they will kick you out-of-doors for a dirty dog. Of course, I admit, the influence spreads. We have all just been allowing for that. You can do things you couldn't do twenty years ago, and get away with them ; but you mustn't *say* them, unless you are one of the big pots who've been saying them throughout the twenty years. There's still a lot of odium to be got by being honest : there's still a lot of money to be made by telling lies. If we were to start a great campaign—'Back to the ideal of the Victorian home!'—'Monogamy for all and prostitution for the rest!'—'Down with the scoundrel Shaw!'—I believe we should rush the position. Provided, of course, that we kept on printing pictures of the scoundrel

Shaw sun-bathing on the Riviera, and interviews with him about Einstein and other subjects of which he is entirely ignorant. That's the notion. I'm not pressing it on you. I'm quite open to conviction. But I submit that it deserves consideration."

The other three gave it that. They sat in silence, engaged in their private mannerisms—Leonard turning his cigar round to scrutinise its glowing end, Isaac studying the blotting-paper in front of him, Abel adjusting his blue collar and his blue tie. At last Leonard spoke.

" I'm against it," he said flatly. " There's a great deal in what you say ; but I think things are moving too fast for the view to hold. I think they have got to a point at which people want not only to do what they please—they've always wanted to do that, of course—but also to be told it's simply splendid to do what they please. Flattery, my boy, flattery—that's the tip ! The modern middle-class girl is going to have sexual adventure anyway : what she wants to feel is that she's a heroine and a reformer for doing it. And it's she, quite as much as her father and a great deal more than her mother, who buys a daily paper. As with the young women, so with the young men. Watch their steps, and tell them they needn't watch their steps ! "

" They're going to become mothers and fathers," said Isaac.

" They're going to spend a lot of time and trouble finding out how *not* to become mothers and fathers," said Abel.

" Well, there it is," said Arthur, with a sudden access of the curious blithe bitterness which uplifted

him whenever he had an intuition about money or success, and which was perhaps the nearest thing he could experience to happiness. " Personally, I'm a prophet and a pioneer from now on. Leonard has completely convinced me. I stand for truth and progress, and the freedom to do what you bloody well please. Every man has an inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of his neighbour's wife. More *flair* to the *Comet* ! "

The informal conference broke up, and Sir Leonard retired to his private room downstairs. He rang through and gave instructions for Henry Strange to be shown in. He rarely saw anybody in that room, but he felt this to be an extraordinary occasion, a special case. The young man entered, not without foreboding. He knew it was a principle of the Lake papers that the proprietor did not go behind the backs of his editors : he felt that, to explain the summons which had brought him to this interview, something quite dreadful must have occurred —or be about to occur. He thought only of his work ; had he perhaps been giving too much space to the neo-ultra-primitives ? Yet surely that was an editorial matter ? He entered, twittering, and was very quickly reassured. He was too young and innocent to suspect what purpose lay behind the reassurance.

About the paper, about its literary features, Sir Leonard was immensely flattering. He quarrelled with Henry gently over the definition of " mass " in relation to the definition of " line," and caught him out in a misquotation of Gide. He gave him a whiskey-and-soda ; he encouraged him to air his evanescent convictions. At last he said :

"Forgive me, dear lad—I'm going to say something which may have the air of an impertinence."

Henry stared wildly. Impertinence—from this colossus! It was as if a volcano had asked if it might smoke.

"You know," Sir Leonard went on, "that I never butt in on the personal affairs of my colleagues. I don't want to do so, and I have no right to do so. But every now and then a curiosity—a legitimate, or possibly an illegitimate curiosity : you must give me your views on that—is inevitably aroused. One hears rumours—one can't help hearing rumours—about people's private lives : especially, if I may say so, when the people concerned have the courage of their convictions, and do openly what everybody would like to do in secret. Now, as between friends——"

Henry's stare became almost idiotic, and darted wildly to every corner of the room.

"Let me put it this way," said Sir Leonard. "There has never been any secret about the fact that Isabel Heyday lived for some considerable time with Arthur Benson. Arthur himself, bless him, was proud of the fact, and rightly proud of it. He forced the world to accept it. He would have no compromise. I admire him for that—I admire him immensely! He has always had courage, and it is a vital quality. But Isabel Heyday has left him—O, I don't enquire why! My curiosity is not of *that* prurient kind, I can assure you. My only reason for bothering you is this. During the years when I occasionally had the privilege of meeting Isabel at Arthur's house, I became, I think I may say without vanity, a friend of hers. We had interests in

common—Arthur was himself the chief of them. Well, she has left him—but I should grieve if I thought the acquaintance between her and myself was permanently broken. Rumour tells me, with an insistence I cannot ignore, that she is now living with you. I congratulate you, dear lad—I congratulate you heartily, both on the privilege you enjoy and on your bravery in enjoying it in the face of public opinion. What I wanted to beg was a resumption of the privilege of Isabel's acquaintance : I want you both to come and see me—I want to visit *you*. . . ."

Henry, burbling with gratitude, presently departed ; and Sir Leonard stood for a long time silent and thoughtful, gazing romantically into the electric radiator.

# CHAPTER III

## DINNER AND DESTINY

Sir Leonard Lake's relations with women were selective and discreet. He had, up to the age of fifty, felt no temptation to marry : marriage, he believed, with however adaptable a woman, would circumscribe that large liberty of personal assertiveness which was the breath of life to him. After all, he reflected, a wife is bound to be a nuisance. If she is docile, her passivity reproaches you : if she has a style of her own, it cramps yours. Of mistresses, too, he tended to fight shy. They made claims, and scenes, and there was something in him which admitted their right to do it. You could not, if you were an artist—and he knew himself to possess the artist's instinct, if not of creation, at least of appreciation—expect or even want to buy human flesh and blood in the market-place. The arts of the courtesan did not invite him. He was fastidious. His vast wealth was in this connection very little good to him. The things he desiderated were unpurchasable. The perfect woman must be at once a vital person and a dumb doll : brilliant in society, provocative in privacy, able to share in the appreciation of music and poetry and pictures and economics and food and wine, willing to fade out into nothingness when *his* appreciations conflicted with hers. She must admire his success uncritically : she must contribute to

it unceasingly : she must not expect to be noticed when he was pursuing it. His fair-mindedness recognised the fact that the post was difficult to fill. Whenever, temporarily deluded by fantasy, he did pursue a woman of his world, he soon regretted it. Either a man was turned down, a conclusion which he accepted philosophically but resented as incompatible with his normal role of success ; or he succeeded, and became involved. Notes arrived at inconvenient moments : assignations were expected : husbands had laboriously to be deceived. Sir Leonard's vision of himself, which was the most potent element in the composition of that self, excluded subterfuge. He was big or he was nothing. Well, then, women had to be ruled out ! It was hard—hard on him, and, he could not help feeling, harder on women : but there was no getting away from it ! Occasional lusts, of course, insisted upon being placated : it was no part of the superman to be superhuman : but one winked at that, and forgot it. Life is a clumsy business, and, if it will not adjust itself to the artist's conception, it and not the artist is to blame. Sir Leonard rather fostered his foibles in many respects : he liked to think of himself as the superman in the street : he could afford not to pretend to impossible and undesirable perfections. But about sex he was secret and ill at ease. Possibly it was this that made him a champion of reform.

He had dined at Arthur's home, and met Isabel. Here at last, he began to fancy, might be—or might have been !—a solution of his difficulties. He did not understand her : the whole world of her dreams and aspirations was to him inconceivable : but what he

saw excited him. He saw beauty ; and he was a connoisseur of beauty. He saw enthusiasm ; and that was a good thing in its place. He thought he saw subservience (it was here, precisely, that his perceptions failed) ; and subservience, in other people, was a necessity. If only he had met her first ! But Arthur, he realised, though the smaller man of the two, was too big to be turned into an enemy. There was a ruthlessness there, a cruelty, a determination, which the financier respected. He did not spend much time in speculating whether he could win Isabel away : he knew that to make the attempt would be ruinous. He sighed, and withdrew : it was one of his maxims that an Englishman always knows when he is beaten. But he waited—there can never be any harm in waiting.

And then he heard that she had left Arthur, and given her incomparable gift of loveliness into the helpless and slightly grimy hands of one of his more insignificant employees. Obviously, the stars had been put in their courses to accommodate Sir Leonard Lake ! Yet, even so, he experienced no temptation towards haste or easy assumptions. He knew, with brain if not with heart, that there was something called "love," which made human beings commit incalculable acts, and put a spoke in the best-greased wheels. Presumably Isabel had "loved" the greedy and gloomy Arthur : presumably she "loved" the decadent and feeble Henry. It was all very odd ; but, in rigging the market, one allowed for the incidence of squalls. To ring the woman up and ask to be kept in touch with her, whether her husband were included in the

general invitation or not, would be a slight which even the poorest husband might resent—or his wife might resent on his behalf. But the way lay open through Henry's weakness and vanity. Appeal to those, said Sir Leonard to himself judicially, and the rest would follow. It might take time ! In a sense, it *ought* to take time ! Nothing worth while was to be got without patience—but the exercise of patience, when the end was once marked down, became in itself a thrilling activity. Henry Strange was summoned to the audience-chamber, and shortly afterwards he and Isabel were asked to dine.

There was no more to it than that, at first ; and, if Isabel had been what Sir Leonard supposed, there would never have been any more to it. But her capacity for love was not a mere yielding to the demand for alms : it involved an ambition, an ideal, a guiding star. The certitudes of the moment were sufficient for the moment : she never tricked herself into imagining that they were sufficient for life. Henry's personality was touching and charming ; but it was as a grain of sand to a continent in comparison with the splendour and wealth of Isabel's ; and, though she did not put it to herself in those terms, and was indeed incapable of any comparison that was not built upon humility, she suffered a restlessness while she was with him. The jargon and gossip of his friends were meaningless to her—partly through the friends' fault, and partly also through hers. The exquisite agony of early embraces, so exquisite because so tender, so agonising because so inexpressive of an ultimate union, began to pall. In Isabel's generosity there was inevitably an element

of the uncompromising. She would give all she had to give : she would never pretend to give what she had not.

She welcomed Sir Leonard's notice because it signalled the return to a larger and more auspicious world. His money meant nothing to her : she literally never thought of him as everybody else thought of him—as a man possessed of colossal power because possessed of incalculable wealth. Nor did the machinery of business and politics affect her imagination. But she liked the rhythm and colour of adventurous living : she liked to hear, though she had little impulse or power to share, the talk of people who vividly appreciated and vigorously performed. There was in any case no question of refusing the dinner invitation ; Sir Leonard's junior employees, however suavely he might call them colleagues, did not refuse his invitations ; but Isabel greeted it with enthusiasm, and Henry accepted it with apprehension.

The party was selected with care and curiosity. There was a tall, lean, brown, fascinating politician called Leveridge, who would certainly be a Cabinet Minister in the next Labour Government, and his wife, a little Newnham in her intellectual austerities. There was Rudolph Brown, the poet, so eager to live up to, or live down, his reputation for girlish beauty. There was Isaac Whyte, utterly elegant and frighteningly slim in the insolent perfection of his evening clothes. There was a shy, twittering lady-novelist, Norah Help, young and pretty and still breathless from her first boom ; there was a large, powerful, angry lady-novelist, Eliza Cressey, who

had enjoyed booms for years, and mocked at her own reputation and everybody else's. To complete the balance, there was Rosamund. Sir Leonard wanted Isabel to feel as much as possible at home, and Oliver was agreeably acquiescent when his wife was asked without him. "It's just a question of numbers, dear boy," said Sir Leonard in explanation ; and Oliver did not care.

Rosamund found herself between Leveridge and Brown, and the position amused her. She knew them both well by reputation : she sensed at once that Leveridge wanted to talk about Isabel, and Brown wanted to talk about himself : and she plumped for the former topic. Leveridge was so sure of his own charm that he could afford to say things which from anybody else would have been impertinent. He did so now.

"I have always wanted to know your sister better," he said cheerfully. "I used to meet her sometimes at Benson's, but progress was difficult, for I don't like Benson. Do you ? "

"I have been half in love with him all my life," said Rosamund placidly.

"O, *love* ! " said Leveridge—"one doesn't count that ! ' Half in love ' is compatible enough with a whole dislike. The man has a demonic force, I grant you. It is obvious that he could produce a violent effect on a woman's emotions. I was talking about something different."

"I think perhaps," answered Rosamund, "I was referring to the *other* half of love. Anyway, I am devoted to Arthur. We never speak to each other if we can help it."

"As serious as that?" queried Leveridge, raising his eyebrows and cocking his head at her quizzically. "This, I hope you agree, is the only entertaining form of talk—the exploration of personal reactions."

"It used to be, I suppose," answered Rosamund. "But it seems to me that our modern frankness has robbed the subject of its interest. We all take the clothes off our thoughts in public, and that leaves so little to explore. It would have been quite exciting for you to discover my weakness if I had concealed it. But I have confessed over the soup, and now we have nothing left to carry us past the fish. Unless, of course, you like to balance my confession with one of your own. That would be the act of a gentleman."

"Ah!" said Leveridge, "I count nothing as confession which does not involve shame. You are proud of your feeling about Benson, and so you can talk of it to strangers; but, if I were to reciprocate, I should be showing to you what I dare not show to myself. That would *not* be the act of a gentleman."

Rosamund looked at him and laughed. Her laugh was as delicious as ever—it seemed to come bubbling up from some inexhaustible spring of careless wisdom.

"Do you really imagine, after that," she asked, "that you have not taken the clothes off your thoughts about my sister Isabel?"

"You win," replied Leveridge, only slightly startled. "But, in doing so, you have proved my point. I said that talk of this kind was exploration, and that that was what made it entertaining."

"I was laughing," said Rosamund, "at your simplicity in conversation—not at the quality of

your desires. About them, I might be serious, and fail to provide you with entertainment."

"You have boasted of frankness," said Leveridge, "It is up to you to make good your boast. You must know very well what effect your sister's beauty and reputation are likely to have on the romantic male. Why boggle over what you know?"

"It was you," retorted Rosamund, "who brought in the mention of shame. I have always felt protective about my sister. She is too good for the men who look at her as you would like to be looking. I hate what you call the effect of her beauty and reputation, because her beauty is something that you could never see, and her reputation is entirely false to her actual self. I must say I am glad to meet a man who has the grace to be ashamed in the circumstances."

Leveridge bowed his head. He had a gift of sudden and utter sincerity, and always played it as an ace.

"You are right," he said, "or would be, if it were true that men like me cannot see the real beauty of women who are too good for us. But surely it is precisely the function of such beauty to make us able to see it. Nobody ever appreciated Raphael's painting till Raphael's painting had taught him how."

"A pretty sentiment," said Rosamund, not unkindly. "But you are talking to a grown woman who has watched a man or two in her time."

"You needn't bother to take any notice of me, you know," broke in Brown from her other side. "I'm quite happy and quiet, making an epigram about our host."

"Don't, for Heaven's sake, tell me a half-made

epigram," said Rosamund. "Everybody is so eager to shine that nobody takes the trouble to polish. Besides, it isn't decent to be witty at the expense of a man at whose expense you are eating."

"O, financiers have no feelings," Brown assured her easily. "I should be very glad to hear, if wholly agreeable to herself, Mrs. Todgers's notion of a financier?"

"A financier is a man," said Rosamund, "who raises the wind by sailing near it."

"So is a poet, nowadays," answered Brown.

Rosamund laughed again.

"I was wondering," she said, "just how long it would take us to get the conversation round to poets."

Brown consulted his watch.

"Thirty seconds," he said. "Not good, but not bad. My record is fifteen and a half."

"We are two to one," boomed Miss Cressey unexpectedly from the other side of the table. "Novelists to poets, I mean. And anyhow, Rudolph, I refuse to hear any more about you from yourself. If we are going to talk literature, as of course we are, I insist that we talk about Norah here. She is far more interesting than you, and far newer, and in my opinion far prettier."

"O, don't let them talk about *me*!" gasped Miss Help, horrified.

"Nonsense, my dear—nonsense," shouted Miss Cressey. "What else do you come to dinner-parties *for*?"

"Well," said Rudolph, rather indignantly, "you oughtn't to be in this argument anyway. Mrs.

Heyday and I were getting on quite perfectly, until you interrupted. And I don't want to talk about Miss Help. I haven't read anything she's written."

"I should doubt whether you had read anything that anybody has written," thundered Miss Cressey, "if I didn't see the evidence embedded in your verse. And I won't have Norah insulted."

"O, but he's so *right*!" wailed poor Miss Help, looking round for protection. "Why *should* he read my dreadful book? O do, do let us talk about your poetry, Mr. Brown!"

"Certainly," said Rudolph; and did. He did it so well that presently a silence fell on most of the table, and Isabel, who had hitherto allowed Sir Leonard to monopolise her, had leisure to look round. She smiled, a musing and tender smile. She caught her lover's eye, and gave him reassurance. She caught Leveridge's, and her face changed. It was not the first time she had seen that look, nor was it to be the last. But seldom could she hope to see it on a face in which charm and purpose were so strangely mingled. It was, to her, as if a bell had sounded somewhere, and all her faculties must attend. She saw the future, and this man in it, reading her, needing her, acquiring. Quickly, instinctively, she glanced on to Rosamund. Rosamund was regarding her with intensity—there was a veil over the feeling that was so intense. It was not possible for the sisters to be hostile, or ill-at-ease with one another; but for the moment Isabel realised that she did not know what was implied or intended. Could it be that Rosamund, her Rosamund, was frightened for her? Could it be that she, Isabel, was a little frightened for herself?

Her eyes travelled to Leveridge's wife, and found that admirable woman preoccupied with political discussion. They came back to Rosamund, and asked, almost pleaded, for a sign, an interpretation, a renewal of confidence. Being refused, they turned to Rudolph Brown and his circle : all there was amusement and ease. Lastly, they met Sir Leonard's. He sat there, large, quiet, eupeptic, observant : she thought of a slightly bloated spider, and dismissed the thought. Sir Leonard smiled at her, wisely, kindly, pleasantly. But she felt the more afraid.

And the second fear, like the first, had basis in fact. Sir Leonard had not achieved his position without the employment of real psychological subtlety and insight. There was a man, and a dangerous man, behind the innumerable poses and deceptions, the facets presented to others and to himself. He was powerful enough to know when power was useless ; he was clever enough to keep a place for humility, and to put forward weakness as a claim. His dinner-party, which he enjoyed, because he enjoyed food and drink and the interchange of opinions and the clash of personalities, was but the first small step in a campaign deeply planned, a process whose prize was to be worth all the difficulties and delays. He had a technique, and was proud of its simplicity. To win a woman, he believed, you must offer her the satisfaction of a craving : the first step was to discover what the craving was. His intention was to watch Isabel ; already he possessed a clue. Why should this lovely creature, so pure, so direct, so vital, have given herself in turn to a tired drunkard like old Oliver Heyday, a maniacal egoist like Arthur

Benson, and an insignificant trifler like Henry Strange ? They had nothing in common—not ideas nor ideals, not age nor youth, not taste nor character—nothing but their need of Isabel. Well, he would need her too ! His assurances and abundances were no good to him now ; he must depend entirely upon dependence. So, immediately, he *did* need her : the role had only to be conceived to be assumed : it had only to be assumed to be assured. Sir Leonard looked round his table, reflected upon the amenities he had so recently appreciated, and dismissed them from his mind as not worth while.

Isabel, as Rosamund was accustomed to say, was no fool but God's fool. Her divine obtuseness never made her silly. You could not trick her by pretence. But Sir Leonard's genius was that his pretences became realities. When he did the generous thing, he was really generous. When he did the wise thing, he was really wise. When he decided upon humility, he became really humble. He at once saw himself, realised himself, understood himself, at this juncture, as a lonely and disappointed man. He was ridiculously rich ; but what were riches to him, lacking Isabel ? He had his cronies and his hobbies ; but he was desperate for affection and fulfilment. He had a host of businesses, and wanted a home ! He turned full round to Isabel, and as he did so she seemed to see him shrink and tremble. He was no longer the spider who bided his prey ; he himself was the victim, and he was looking at her with a gaze that implored deliverance. He was asking her, so far as mere speech went, merely if he might come and visit her. He was asking her, with what he could

command of mind and soul, if she would save his mind and soul alive.

She was immediately, deeply and bitterly troubled. She knew the omens. She foresaw disaster. Always before, her decisions had been sudden and almost serene: for the first time in her life, she did not want to do what she feared she must. The peril to Henry's peace of mind was obvious, and she loved Henry; but beyond that peril loomed up the shadow of something larger and darker. She had no use for self-trickery. She had never pretended that her response to Henry's appeal could be the final gesture of a being still fresh and full of ardour. But this . . . ?

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "Do come and see me. Come and see me whenever you feel like it! Only be careful of what you bring, and what you take away."

From that moment onwards Leonard Lake neither relaxed nor relented. His vast energy was bent to a single aim. And, the more profoundly the game was played, the more obsessing it proved. He had decided to need Isabel; he had not understood that you cannot, at will, call a halt to necessity. He haunted her paths; he waited upon her occasions; he made himself at home in her home. Henry he scarcely noticed. His business undertakings he left to colleagues and subordinates. His music, his connoisseurship, his social brilliance and magnificence, became like distant tinklings, like wreaths of faint smoke upon a vanishing horizon. His nature, in his own judgment, had altered; but, in fact, his denials of his nature, the diversions he had practised upon it, the falsenesses to which he had subdued it, were

united to take their overwhelming revenge. His acquaintances frowned at one another, and shook their heads, and asked one another what had happened to poor old Lake. What had happened to him was quite simple. He had fallen in love.

The full realisation came one evening in September. The weather was mild, with that lingering after-taste of romance with which autumn challenges the easier provocations of spring. The two had been to a concert, and Leonard, instead of discreetly driving Isabel home to Bloomsbury as was his habit, told the chauffeur to take them back to Park Lane. Isabel had been to the house with Henry several times since that first significant visit ; but to return with Leonard alone, and at this hour, was of a different significance.

Isabel was thoughtful, and, as always after she had been listening to music, she seemed to be specially withdrawn into her own fairyland. She made no comment on the novel plan, and, when they arrived, she followed Leonard to his study, where she had never been before, without saying a word. He settled her in his arm-chair, fussed round her for a little with offers of food and drink, to which he obviously scarcely expected an answer, and then of a sudden knelt before her and began to beg.

" My darling," he said, in a voice different from his own, " I don't know what you have done to me. Do you know it at all yourself? "

Isabel looked at him long in silence. She was oblivious of the absurdities : she did not see a fat middle-aged man in an undignified attitude on the carpet ; she saw only the ancient hunger, which it

was her mission and doom to assuage. She stretched out a hand and stroked his hair.

"I can't go on," said Leonard thickly. He could call up nothing but the most obvious and hackneyed phrases ; he was in a most obvious and hackneyed situation. "I've done big things, and they're all worthless and useless. I hate everything that I've ever turned my hand to. I am kept alive by the need for you, and by that only. But I must have all of you. I'm not asking for passing favours ; I can't share you ; I can't have you partly in my life and partly out of it. I don't want you as a mistress. I want you as a companion and friend and counsellor, and the sharer of my home and the mother of my children. Isabel, you have got to marry me."

Isabel smiled sadly.

"All of me is too big an order, Leonard," she said. "But I agree that I have got to marry you."

# CHAPTER IV

## THE SEX-CONFERENCE

It was the United Conference of Councils for the International Study of Sex that gave rise to the famous quarrel between the *Meteor* and the *Comet*. The *Meteor* was edited by Lascelles Bean, one of many Fleet Street moralists. Himself a man of austere tastes and high vitality, he exploded into reproof and propaganda as lesser men do into self-seeking and sin. With politics he was not concerned; he took those from his employer, and handed them on to his leader-writers and sub-editors with only that slight subtle change of note, that touch of canonisation and benediction, which somehow signified that they were now lifted from the region of current controversy into the calm air of religious truth. Of sport he knew nothing, except that the men who did sport for him knew much. Of music, painting, sculpture and literature he approved, but within limits of his own imposing. Neither melody nor harmony must be frenetic, save for jazz; and jazz had outwitted him, having got itself firmly embedded among the impossible loyalties of the suburbs before he had noticed its arrival. Once accepted, it ranked thenceforward with the British Constitution, monogamy, the mitigated-middle-Anglican variations on Christianity, and a revenue tariff. (But so had ranked, alas, how short a time ago, the Treaty of Versailles,

and the least light word of Mr. Lloyd George!) In painting and sculpture, all was taken for granted except the "Modern," which was denounced, and the Nude, which was allowed only on the walls of Burlington House.

But it was in the praise and blame of letters that Mr. Bean continually excelled himself, leaping from strength to strength. For it is in the disguise of literature, after all, that the serpent of modernity can most easily intrude into the Eden of morality. It is indeed a weakness of some editors to regard a book as useful for no other purpose. It is "news," because it may, like Socrates, mislead the "young": and the "young," like "women," renew their news-value every morning and evening. It would not have occurred to Mr. Bean to read a book for aesthetic enjoyment: he thought in tendencies, problems, perils and superlatives. Genuinely ascetic in private life, he was, in his public thinking, genuinely muddled. He really wanted to suppress what he believed to be vice; he really did not see that advertisement was scarcely an aid to suppression; and the craftsman side of him, the part that gloried in the function of journalism, accepted the practical results of advertisement with relish.

He had a peculiar horror of words! Words, the well of English, must at all costs stay undefiled. The vocabulary of those writers at whose large knees we have all sat, the plain obscenities which are somehow acceptable in Shakespeare, in Swift, in Fielding, have sunk from respectability to disrepute. (This devil of change! Here is something like the history of the Treaty of Versailles!)

Those words—and their modern equivalents—must be kept out ; and everywhere they were creeping in.

But " sex," " sex " itself, was the worst word of all ! If *that* could be kept out, driven out, wiped out, stamped out, Mr. Bean would be able to sleep happy ! (There would, perhaps, be a fall in the circulation of the *Meteor*, but this aspect the editor had not envisaged. He did not need to envisage it. He knew that sex would last his time.) He filled his columns with denunciations which required the word to be used in every size of type. He made and kept his audience by his reiterations. Whatever else might be happening, the public was sure of its sex-stimulation in the *Meteor* and its kin. If there was a book, a play, a public monument, whose appeal was directed, irrespective of aesthetic standards, to the sex-instinct, the world heard about it from the *Meteor*. If there were passages, in any publication, which the Puritan could desire to see suppressed, they were reprinted in full, or with appetising asterisks, in the *Meteor*. In all this, Mr. Bean was entirely sincere. He was a good citizen, a good editor, and a good man.

The Sex-Conference, or U.C.C.I.X.—Uccix, as it came to be called—offered him an opportunity in every sense golden. There were foreigners coming to it, and professors—strange, hairy, world-famous men, with kind manners and indecent manuscripts. Sex-starved folk of all sorts, behind locked doors, were to compare their sexual experiences. Pillars of Church and State—a provincial Lord Mayor, a dean who had given up hope of becoming a bishop, a

woman-novelist with a notoriously happy home life and twelve children—were to preside at the open sessions. They were at the old game—flooding the dykes, loosening the props, letting in the water, encouraging the enemy to prowl ! Mr. Bean rolled up his sleeves, and sent for the man who did the posters.

It was he who coined the abbreviation Uccix, legitimately altering the hiss of the double S, which precision might have expected, to the stabbing, crackling sound of finality. He opened his campaign with the war-cry : " Uccix or Coccyx ? " and added with Shakespearean crudity : " Thereby hangs a tail ! " He asked whether we were to revert to the social degradation of the larger primates (this greatly distressed the liberal-minded dean, who thought he meant archbishops), or, in the beautiful words of a poet now unjustly denigrated, to let the ape and tiger die ? He predicted a lapse and ruin of civilisation, a state of chaos in which people would behave as they had always behaved throughout history. He got up a memorial, and intimidated three Cabinet Ministers into putting their names to it—in an unofficial capacity. He demanded that police protection should be accorded to the institution of the family. He urged that a mob of clean-minded, right-thinking, law-abiding citizens should break up the Conference and rebuke the females who took part in it, and that police protection should be withdrawn from the meetings. He gutted the more startling volumes of the hairy foreigners, and reprinted the supposed confessions of degenerates in leaded type. The circulation of the *Meteor* rose like a forest fire.

Arthur Benson was not the man to miss either the

challenge or the chance. His journalistic sense had already told him that the Conference was worth a campaign of adjectives. He would have been ready, had Lake seen eye to eye with him, to take Bean's line : he saw that the opposite line could be made even more effective. To the pure, he said, all things should be public. He raved, in streamers and leaders, about the liberty of association and the sacredness of the search for truth. He circularised five-and-twenty publicists of international reputation, and got their signatures to a document fantastic with fulmination. He sent an army of canvassers to sympathise with mothers of large working-class families, and flew afresh the flag of contraception. He gave prizes for the best postcards on the most delicate subjects, and challenged the police to interfere. He had actresses and sportswomen interviewed on "The Right to Know," and put into their mouths the phrases of Milton and Mill. He searched, with keener zest and far more intricate knowledge than Bean could bring to the task, the professors' volumes ; and, for every flash in the *Meteor's* pan, he splashed a crimson rain of frank avowals. The *Comet* boomed and flared across the sky of notoriety. "Hereby also," said Arthur, rubbing his hands, "a tail may be said to hang ! "

Actually, after the first day, few people attended the Conference, for the lectures were consumedly learned and very long.

But the episode was not to close without a more personal vendetta. The great Bean had worked himself into a blind and righteous fury, in which he was more dangerous to his own side than to the other.

He had ceased altogether to think of what was actually happening : he burnt with purpose and desire. Even the actuaries' certificates of net sales seemed now of little moment. Evil was abroad in the land, was raising its insolent head in the heart of the Empire, was triumphing over purity, was mocking at Mr. Bean. In an unhappy moment, he asked his huge audience to consider the action of a rival British newspaper which dared to push Uccix and wave Coccyx. Who, he asked, owned that newspaper, and what was the moral status of the owner's associates, and when had anybody ever compounded a moral felony save for his own advantage? He could not himself have told whether he *meant* to stress the fact that Leonard had married Isabel, with all her reputation thick upon her.

Arthur rubbed his hands again when he read the article. This was taking off the gloves and hitting below the belt indeed—two processes which his nature approved, but his reason condemned as rash. He pictured to himself, with an ugly rapture, the hush that would be prevailing in the *Meteor* office, when those who had seen the stuff overnight, in the heat of setting, read to-day, in the cold blood of morning, the libel for which they could be called to account. That the blow was aimed at Isabel gave him neither pain nor pleasure. He had no loyalty to memory on the one hand, nor, on the other, was his bitterness so slight as to be appeased by an easy insult. Isabel, he realised, would be unaffected anyway. Knowing no shame, she would not flinch at the words of shame. If hot-headed and wrong-headed old gentlemen in Fleet Street chose to hold her up

to execration, why (Isabel would certainly say), "God bless them!" For a moment, Arthur savoured the belief that Rosamund at any rate would suffer. But even that gave him little comfort: he did not think she would suffer much. What inspired him was the call to action, the infinite possibility of embittered strife. How would Lake take it? Would there be a libel action, with its glorious publicity? Or would he, Arthur, get a free hand to hit back—no gloves on, belt disregarded, a frank recognition of the joy of drawing blood? And where would it end, and how many people would be soiled and moiled in the process?

He rang up Lake, and rushed to Park Lane.

But he found the financier a little disappointing. Leonard was sitting alone in one of his vast board-rooms, with the *Meteor* spread out on the table before him. He looked up, pink and calm, but with a slight frown marring the smoothness of his noble forehead.

"I'm sorry Bean has done this," he said, shaking his head. "It makes the position very difficult."

"It makes the opportunity very exhilarating," said Arthur drily, sitting down near him and looking keenly across the open sheets.

"It's all right for you," Leonard agreed. "The Lord has delivered your enemy into your hands. There's nothing you can't say about him now, and get away with. And, as you're God's own mud-slinger, I quite see how you feel. But I've got to think of Isabel."

Arthur shrugged. He did not like the open mention of the name. He could not understand the

magnanimity which could allow it to be spoken between them. He wanted to keep the conversation away from his own scars, away from the humiliation which he felt the other man ought to be feeling. He preferred the business line.

"You could sue," he said shortly.

"I couldn't," Leonard contradicted him. "That's exactly what I couldn't do—though, to do Bean justice, I don't think he counted upon that. I expect he's trembling in his shoes at this moment for fear that I *shall*. But it wouldn't do, and surely you must see it."

"Why do Bean justice?" asked Arthur. He was continually recognising and resenting in his friend a directness, a frankness before the avoidable, which he himself could never achieve and did not want to achieve. He acted, when he had to, with instinctive singleness of purpose; but he left his emotions an angry blur.

"O, I'd cheerfully hang the brute," admitted Leonard. "I'm not being chivalrous, you know. But you ought to understand by this time, my dear Arthur, that one cannot handle a situation unless one faces up to what it is. If I were to say to myself, and you, that this dirty attack was part of a calculated campaign, I should be able to work myself up into a magnificent glow of righteous anger; but the theory would handicap me in meeting the attack, because it happens not to be true."

"You're a philosopher," said Arthur acidly, "and I hope it's a comfort to you. You mean, anyway, that you can't sue because of the amount of linen that would have to be washed in public?"

"That," agreed Leonard mildly, though he felt a violent anger at the brutality of the phrase—" and also the impossibility of counting on a verdict. The assault is as libellous, as poisonously libellous, as anything can be, but think of the legions of hypocrisy that could be marshalled in its support ! Conceive me under cross-examination ! What personal references did I read into such-and-such a passage ? Why did I hasten to fit the cap upon myself ? Did I or did I not believe in the purity of the British home ? Was it or was it not the fact that I owned and controlled a weekly paper, *Sense and Sex*, which had long been advocating sexual licence? Had there not appeared in that paper articles of a pornographic tendency ? (There have, you know, Arthur—nobody knows it better than you : you wrote a lot of the damned articles yourself.) Should I like a daughter of my own to be exposed to such contamination ? Did I or did I not approve of the tendency of those articles ? If I did not, what was my excuse for making money out of them ? And if I did, could I wonder that the pure-minded suspected me of carrying on the foul work everywhere ? Why, if those were my principles, did I resent the imputation of putting them into practice ? Was it not a matter of public interest, of public urgency and importance, to bring the hidden evil into the light of day ? And then the final appeal to the jury ! Were they not themselves fathers of families, with holy hearthstones to preserve from violation, and a sacred tradition to hand on ? "

"I doubt whether all that would be allowed on the straight issue," said Arthur.

"I doubt it myself," said Leonard. "It would

depend on the line the trial followed—on the cleverness of counsel and the attitude of the judge. But that a clever lawyer would try to insinuate that sort of thing, and would succeed in getting a good deal of the atmosphere across, is as certain as death itself. I don't mean that Isabel could be actually named : I mean that the whole newspaper-reading world could be set talking about her in the wrong way, sneering at her, pitying her—or, what is worse, championing her in clubs and pubs. It isn't easy for her anyway : her history is well enough known : you didn't exactly hide your light under a bushel, and I don't blame you : but already, because of that, there are places where I cannot take her and risks I cannot run. It isn't that Isabel minds—I needn't tell *you* that. It's that *I* mind. I've taken infinite trouble to get an established position for her. I have succeeded, so far, simply because I am rich. The people who want to be saved from ruin nowadays—who want at all costs to be let in to the money-making business—are very numerous : and a lot of them are in my power. But the secret of power is not to try to go beyond it. A libel action at this juncture is more than even I could stand for. Suppose I didn't get a verdict—or got a verdict and a farthing damages ! I should be shaken in the place where all my power comes from—in my personal credit, in the money-markets. My ' say-so ' would lose its magic. This is common-sense, Arthur, and we've got to face it."

Arthur was looking at him with real curiosity. This was the first time it had been admitted between the two men that the wife of the one was the discarded mistress of the other. To Arthur, the situation was so

full of pain and shame that he shrank from it even in his thoughts ; he would, long before, have gone the length of cutting himself loose from Lake, if that had not involved the sacrifice of his life's essentials ; and to put the conflict into words was beyond him. Yet here was the man who, by every convention of the social code, was in the more humiliating position, apparently naming the unmentionable without embarrassment. Was it, he asked himself, that Lake had himself so thoroughly in control as to kill sincere emotion at its source—or was he really (this seemed absurd to Arthur) sincere ? Had all the stuff about freedom and the higher purity been honestly a matter of conviction, to which one could live up, and not merely an excuse for peddling pornography at a profit ? Arthur always had difficulty in believing that anybody could believe in anything as fully as that ! He looked and looked, but could find no clue to his problem in the fresh face and solemn gestures that confronted him. He changed the issue.

" Well, then," he said, " if the law-courts are ruled out, that leaves us free to hit this blighter where it will hurt him most. There must be *something* in his private life that doesn't fit exactly with his public professions. No human being was ever as indecently virtuous as he pretends to be in print. And, even if *he's* invulnerable, he must have connections that aren't. I propose, quite crudely, to put detectives on him, and carry on the fight in his own vein. I shall do it better than he does."

Leonard shook his head gravely.

" Bean is perfectly virtuous," he replied, " and anyway the row would be bad for Isabel."

Arthur began to show irritation.

"You aren't seriously arguing," he said, "that we should leave the brute alone?"

Leonard screwed up his eyes into an expression of tolerant wisdom that seemed to the other man, at the moment, the height of offensiveness.

"Do you know anything," he asked, "about Napoleon's campaign?"

"Only as much," Arthur retorted, "as every ordinary educated person knows."

"Quite, quite," said Leonard. "I am in the same position myself. I don't know anything about Napoleon really, but I know what I like. Well, we'll come back to that. Just tell me, if you don't think the question impertinent, what attitude about this business is Rosamund likely to take up?"

Arthur spread out his arms with a gesture of weariness, almost like a man confessing defeat.

"You are impossible," he said. "You see Rosamund constantly. I never see her, and you are perfectly aware that I never see her. Why do you consult me on that point?"

"Because seeing's not believing," answered Leonard. "It's true that Rosamund comes to my house, and I go to hers. It's true that in a sense we are intimate. It's true that we know a lot about each other. To be frank, I wish she knew, about me, a great deal less than she does. She has me taped and weighed, my boy: I don't like the way the girl looks at me: I don't like her laugh. However, that's a mere matter of my personal vanity, and we are now on serious business. You remember that I have always claimed some of the convictions of the

mystic—no, don't be impatient : we are coming to the realities. I believe that, between any two human beings, there exists or does not exist, as the case may be, a definite physical sympathy, which you can call friendship, or love, or knowledge—and that is what does *not* exist, in spite of all our knowingness, between Rosamund and me. The consequence is that I shall never be able to trust my judgment about her in any connection where her deep emotions are involved—as with her husband, her children or her sister. Now, *you* never see her, but you understand her ! You can tell me off-hand what her reaction to this scandal is bound to be. Will she want us to fight, or to pretend to forget ? She has a glorious common-sense, that woman ! But she won't be sincere with me ! If she gives advice, it will be *made* advice, and her instincts may be overruled by arguments that I can think of much better for myself. I want to know how she will *feel*."

Arthur went on staring. He had turned quite white with the anguish that always assailed him at the thought of Rosamund's invulnerability. The blood hummed at his heart, and he could not think clearly. But he clutched automatically at the apparent chance of getting his own way.

" She would want us to fight," he stammered.

Leonard turned away his head, with a smile of deprecation. He had seen in a glance, summed up in a moment, something that he had long suspected about Arthur's spiritual history and attitude towards life. Where the sisters were concerned, this was not a man to let loose for conflict !

" About Napoleon," he said. " He had lots of

defeats, didn't he—I mean that his armies and his marshals had, all over Europe? And very often his reply was to win a victory of his own, in some quite different place? I think we have our lesson there."

Leonard, like poor Henry Strange on a very different occasion, had decided to give a party.

# CHAPTER V

## PARK LANE PARTY

Nothing could have been more different from Henry Strange's party than Leonard Lake's ; yet, so impudent a part has intelligence taken to playing in English life, many of the same people came to both. Henry himself, a dim bewildered ghost, hovered on the outskirts of the pageant in Park Lane, wistfully conscious that he had lost what he began to doubt if he had ever had. But Leonard's challenge was not to the Stranges of this world. He was resolved, once for all, to put to trial that great question—can the people who pretend be forced to accept the people who declare ?—can the society in which sexual freedom is a perpetual subterfuge be brought into frank and open contact with the society which holds it for an honourable creed ? Between the one set and the other, there was almost admittedly no difference in practice : it was a matter of theory alone. And Leonard had long been interested in theory. A deeper thinker, a sincerer man, would have shrunk from the test, realising by what poor externals it was to be decided. If millions of money could purchase the acquiescence of those who, unintimidated and unbought, would have stood aside in prudery—why then, the sincerer man might have said, nothing about morals was proven ! But, from the beginning of his career, Leonard had held

that life was to be conducted by the help of compromise. No theory is bare : no episode is single : no achievement is unconditional. His own taste in painting and music, of which he was proud, could never have had its full indulgence if he had not been rich. He did not approve of riches, but he saw to it that he secured them ; and music and painting followed humbly, like muses in the wake of Apollo. Precisely so with his philosophy of sex. He could not have thrust a woman of Isabel's known and confessed past upon fashionable London, unless he had first entangled a large part of fashionable London in his financial schemes. That he had the power so to force her did not establish his case ; but it established something. The battle had been fought before, on many differing occasions : over exceptionally brilliant women, and exceptionally beautiful women, and exceptionally well-connected women. No single push availed to break the enemy's line : there was always a special explanation, a special excuse : but an accumulation of partial victories would in time amount to triumph : and meanwhile he was fond of having his own way.

Nothing, therefore, was spared of splendour. The Press—even the Press hostile to his designs and interests—was full for days beforehand, and for days afterwards, of the dazzling function. The *Meteor* itself could not afford to throw the first stone—that would have been, as Rosamund observed, to drop the first brick. The jewels, the stars, the flowers, the orchestras, the singers, the instrumentalists, the expenditure, the guests, made columns of news and gossip. Isabel, unmoved by the magnificence, was

touched by the sentiment. She was to be given status by her husband's decree ; and she presided over the display of his power gently, like a princess in a dream.

Rosamund was at her loveliest and most mischievous for the occasion. She glanced, she glinted, she threw off rays of provocation like a diamond shaken in the sun. But, when she came near her sister, the sparkle steadied to a clear light of devotion. After hours of noise and dazzlement, when at last the crowd began to thin, the two could stand apart for a few minutes, sure of each other and of themselves. It had been so with them from their earliest childhood—a party was not in the full sense a party, to be enjoyed, unless at some point it was intimately shared. They were all the time interrupted : departing guests streamed to take leave : Oliver hovered near, smiling at them out of the corners of his confiding eyes : but to them it seemed as though they had made a small and magic circle, in which they and their nursery memories were enclosed. Isabel was in rose and silver, gentle colours to suit her gentle gravity : Rosamund was silvery too, but with the spring-like note of green. They were of one height, and drew eyes by their likeness and unlikeness.

" You look the part," said Rosamund with appreciation. She flashed round, humorous and attentive : that her sister Isabel should reign so naturally, over a scene so remote from the old Hampstead quarters, excited her sense of the ridiculous. She had always been amused by Isabel, much as a mother is amused, but adoring, over the helplessness of her infant child.

And she recognised that, here, apparent helplessness was not incompatible with adequacy. " You may be a poor mutt and a loose woman," she went on, " but you have surely got away with it."

Isabel laughed agreement.

" It's odd," she said, " when you come to think of it. You were always the bad one, and you and Oliver are the grand examples of self-restraint and monogamy. I have been what almost everybody here would condemn ; yet almost everybody comes along, to glory in my shame. It looks as though the wages of sin and of virtue were much of a muchness, and the child wasn't mother of the woman after all."

" Some day, my darling," said Rosamund, " we must get down to the basis of what you believe. Do you remember those old talks in Hampstead, when we were so inquisitive and young ? And isn't it funny that when we babble now, it's always about husbands and babies ? Why in the world should I have this impulse to sentimentalise, on this occasion of all occasions ? "

" It's quite simple," answered Isabel. " It's just the shock of contrast. You look round at something that doesn't appear to be me-ish, and it makes you think of the days when me-ishness was all I could muster. I think it needs incongruity to make one want to talk fundamentals."

" *Do* you want to talk fundamentals ? " asked Rosamund curiously. " Here and now ? "

" Yes," said Isabel. " I want to, but I can't. And afterwards talking may seem irrelevant." Her eyes were very bright, and she had her fatal aspect upon

her. " I think something's going to happen to-night," she went on, " and I should have liked to make my confession of faith before I went out."

Rosamund stiffened.

" Come, Bel," she said, " talk sense or get on with the hostess-stuff. What the hell do you mean by ' going out ' ? "

" O," laughed Isabel, " I'm not threatening you with a suicide ! But sometimes it happens in life that you walk out of one room into another. I feel as if the doors were opening now."

" In the hour of her triumph, the royal conqueror chose to abdicate," said Rosamund in a dry voice. It was a quotation from one of the history-games of the nursery.

To the crowd which stood about or passed by, there was nothing dramatic in the pose of the sisters. They were two beautiful women, and one at least was known by repute ; it was enough to make them conspicuous and attractive. But, to a close observer, it would have been plain that there was fear in Rosamund's eyes, which were unused to fear, and exaltation in Isabel's, which were not unused to exaltation.

The crowd was thinning more rapidly. Isabel was hard at it, pressing hands, murmuring the expected ; for a few moments she could say nothing to Rosamund, who stood watching the door, still with that look of fear. It was not to be supposed, at this time of night—or morning—that anybody fresh would arrive; but suddenly Isabel began walking to the entrance, as if to meet somebody of whose arrival she was aware, and, in the next few seconds, Anthony Leveridge was announced. Rosamund did not follow

her sister. She turned abruptly away, and was comforted by the sight of Oliver.

" Let's go," she said. " I'm tired."

Oliver was concerned. Very rarely was Rosamund tired : still more rarely would she admit she was. With her, the explanation meant something other than it said. She was pale, too, and the life and sparkle had gone out of her face. Oliver, philosophical, wondered whether she were starting another baby. He said nothing, and offered no endearments or caresses. But, in the car on the way home, Rosamund broke the silence herself.

" Do you know Leveridge ? " she asked her husband.

" Yes, well," said Oliver lightly. " He's a darling."

" That's what I was afraid he might be," said Rosamund.

Leveridge himself, meanwhile, was talking gaily to Isabel. He was a man of confident charm and many conquests ; he took success in his stride ; but underneath his light manner was a deep assurance of necessities. He had known struggles and disappointments ; he had learnt, not without agony, to conceal and conquer ; he had come to believe that nothing vital could be rushed or hurried. About his feeling for Isabel he had had little doubt from the beginning ; but he had made no attempt to pursue her. Nor was this because of hesitation, of timidity. He was not afraid, although he knew the dangers. A public man must be private ; such risks as Leveridge was accustomed to run with women had always been deliberately faced, kept in bounds by caution, and dismissed to the background of his

mind. His wife, he knew, was acquiescent. He did not enquire how much she saw or preferred to leave unseen ; she had her own vigorous intellectual life, and hated as much as he did the idea of scenes and confessions ; he was always charming to her. But he realised to the full what it might mean, for a man with a career before and behind him, to make an enemy of Leonard Lake. Well, he said to himself, what must be must be, and what would be would be. Leonard's professions of belief in free sexual unions he regarded as unhelpful : he was too much of a cynic, too much versed in men and affairs, to anticipate that conduct would march with propaganda. Simply, he regarded the problem as out of his hands. He had kept away from Isabel, but without imagining that he would be able to go on keeping away from her indefinitely. He would face the risks, he supposed, when he ran them ; when he received his invitation to Leonard's party, he accepted the fact that they were upon him. The hour had struck, and he did not contemplate refusal.

But the House had kept him very late : he came on unchanged, singular in his grey suit amid the hard black-and-white and the glittering decorations : his lean, pleasant face, which somehow always looked as though he were on holiday, though in fact he slaved fourteen hours a day on committees and at debates, was challenging in its good looks, its carelessness and its eagerness. He came up to Isabel and frankly took both her hands, indifferent alike to his earlier aloofness and to the noise and colour around him. He said nothing, but Isabel said what was in thought between them.

"At last!" The words were like an "Open Sesame!" to desires so long controlled and withheld.

"Thank God people are going," he answered. "In half-an-hour we shall be able to get in a corner and talk."

"I like the word 'talk,'" said Isabel. "It covers a multitude of things not talked about."

"I'm good at talking," said Anthony. "Shall I tell you about my childhood, or about my ambitions? Those are my topics; but of course there are politics as well."

"I don't want to discuss politics," replied Isabel. "(No, it's not a distinction of the sexes.) And I feel there are going to be many opportunities of hearing about your ambitions. But childhood?—yes! That makes a link with anybody!"

"There are going to be many opportunities," said Anthony, "of hearing about my childhood. The subject really is only a test one. Beyond a certain stage of acquaintance, one wants to explore the past and the future. It's an element of possessiveness, really. To know a person is to possess the person—and that is why one explores."

"Do you mean that *you* are possessive?" asked Isabel, a slight frown coming between her eyebrows.

"Yes," said Anthony.

"So, in his heart, is my husband," said Isabel sombrely. She looked round with a startled air, and came back to rest her eyes upon Anthony's.

Anthony nodded. His nerves were not touched by the avowal. Nor was he surprised at the turn or pace

of the exchange. After all, he had known this all along. What else had he come for ?

" It's a queer thing, psychologically," he told her, " this desire of one human being to feel another in its grasp. O, I don't mean physically ; *that* desire isn't queer at all. The world must be peopled, or so the world thinks. I mean the sense of pride that comes with feeling that one is specially loved, and so can give orders and have them obeyed—for love. It's a deep instinct. It is compatible, really, with the views expounded in *Sense and Sex*."

" It isn't sense," admitted Isabel. " But if it's sex . . . ? "

" The normal woman feels it, I suppose," said Anthony. " Would you call yourself normal ? "

" I shouldn't call anybody normal," retorted Isabel.

" You would admit fine shades of abnormality ? " asked Anthony.

" I would admit no abnormality at all—only uniqueness," Isabel answered him.

" You agree," Anthony said, apparently amused, " with the propaganda of freedom ? "

Isabel shook her head sadly.

" I agree with certain beliefs, but I don't put them forward as propaganda," she said. " I find, in life, that the people who preach so seldom practise. Glance round this room. It's getting empty, thank God ; but there are fifty people in it, and thirty of them, probably, would say that it's degrading for a man to want to own and control a woman, or a woman to want to own and control a man. But how many of them are there that wouldn't exult in the degradation ? "

She broke off for farewells, and turned back to find Anthony brooding.

" It's the gap between intellect and instinct," he said at last. He went on with odd sentences, throwing in his comments between Isabel's dictated duties as hostess. " We know we ought to feel in a certain way, and in generations we succeed. But, meanwhile, what pain—what effort—what disappointment ! And we can't keep our pain to ourselves—we have to pour it out on others. We can't do what we know to be right without breaking the hearts of those who seem more important to us, at the time, than doing what we know to be right. And perhaps, by paradox, it *is* right that they should seem so. It's this devil of affection that retards love. Just as with war—it's the nobility of war that keeps it going : the heroism, the comradeship, the sacrifice. But we've got to get to a stage when we know it's wrong, with all its nobility thrown in. We've got, with sex, to get to a stage when we know that the heroism of devotion, the comradeship of marriage, the sacrifice of monogamy, are obstacles to the true impulse of love."

" I've got to that stage," said Isabel, coming back to him from amid conventionalities.

" I know a little of your history," answered Anthony. " You must, in your time, have broken hearts."

" It is the penalty of truth," said Isabel. " Doesn't all freedom break hearts ? Doesn't all faith break hearts ? Do you think hearts should be immune from breakage, or life from death ? "

" You go beyond me," said Anthony. " I too have done my bit of heart-breaking—but too lightly, too

selfishly, and always with compunction. My self-defence has been that I was prepared, when occasion came, to have my own heart broken."

"It's a good enough defence," Isabel told him. "There's no insurance in the world anyway, for ourselves or for others."

Their long talk had begun to attract notice. Lady Elizabeth Purley, a fine Edwardian woman, angrily handsome, was the centre of a group which cast glances and muttered comments. There was no criticism of Leveridge : everybody liked him, because his manner flattered everybody : and his discretion had always been perfect. But with Isabel it was different. A notorious woman, it was felt, might preside at a glittering gathering and ignore her notoriety ; but she should not flaunt the very thing which made her guests feel themselves condescending in coming.

"The woman has no shame," said Lady Elizabeth, who was herself secretive with assorted shames.

Poynter, the dramatist, was pleased with the simple comment.

"Shame," he said, "is the cement of society. You have named the reason why people like Lady Lake are not to be endured. Everything crumbles around them. The old instinct which drove them out from the community with hatred and cruelty was a sound one."

Lady Elizabeth nodded.

"How well you understand !" she said.

"Yes," said Poynter, "I understand perfectly. It doesn't matter what we do so long as we feel fear and degradation about it. Those are the essential

emotions. Without them, how are we to hold together ? "

Lady Elizabeth stared at him, and gasped slightly, like a fish. She could not think what the man was talking about.

" It's amusing," said another man, carefully keeping one eye half-cocked on Anthony and Isabel, " how insincere sermons come home to roost ! Here has Lake, all his life, been talking about freedom. He's made the best of both worlds out of it, or anyway out of the world and the half-world. He's flattered himself among his cronies as a mystic with a vision—ever heard him on mysticism ? My dears, it's marvellous !—and at the same time he's put across a prurient public every scrap of dirty anecdote and dangerous doctrine that he thought would sell. And he's consistent, mind you, up to a point. He married, openly, a girl who had lived, openly too, with more than one of his acquaintances. Splendid ! Can't you hear his conscience applauding him ? Don't we all applaud him ? The great Lake—so courageous, so magnanimous, so honest ! Look at him living up to his principles !—But, if it comes to cuckolding, everybody will sing the old tune."

" *Do* we applaud him ? " asked a girl, the youngest of the group, who had been scrutinising without shyness or concealment each speaker in turn. " Don't we really in our hearts think his magnanimity contemptible ? He convinces himself, no doubt—but whom else does he convince ? Isn't it a clear case of infatuation, and oughtn't we to be ancient and modern enough to call it lust? He wanted the girl, and it was nice to pretend that it was noble to take

her. But the nobility was fake, on the face of it."

"He needn't have *married* her," said Mrs. Wavening, writer of a Society gossip column. She was wondering how much she would dare to say in print.

"O yes, he need!" said Poynter. "You don't grasp his psychology at all if you think he needn't. Merely to live with a light creature whom other men had lived with, and other men *would* live with, might give a temporary satisfaction to what our young friend here calls lust—but what of it? The satisfaction of lust plays a very small part in the life of a man like Leonard Lake. What is necessary to him is precisely the magnificence—the generous gesture, the sense of being able to afford what others shrink from."

Isabel and Anthony had strolled across the room to a corner, and now sat chatting, well out of earshot of the rest. At that moment Leonard reappeared, presumably returning from the supper-room, and, after a slow survey of the scene, crossed over to his wife and her friend and joined in the conversation. He stood in front of them, bending slightly forwards, catching the thrill of their acquaintance. His face was invisible to his other guests, but his pose seemed a little menacing.

# CHAPTER VI

## THEORY AND PRACTICE

"I am not the sentimental one," said Rosamund to Isabel, "but I have a very sentimental fancy about the talk I want with you. It oftens seems to me, what with politics and babies and business and big houses and all the fuss of life, that you and I have never got quite as close together again as when we were children in that nursery-room of ours in Hampstead. Do you remember how we used to argue about life, and ask each other what we were going to do when the sexual complications arose, and how everything seemed an excitement and an adventure? It's lovely being happily married, but sometimes it's a little dull! I want, for one evening, to get back the old atmosphere, and I don't believe it can be done except in the old place."

"It's a pretty fancy," said Isabel indulgently. "But don't imply that *I'm* the sentimental one, will you? I honestly don't think it's sentimentality that's the matter with me."

"No," admitted Rosamund, looking at her with a queer mixture of criticism and rapture, "I agree it's something even more dangerous."

"And I never find being happily married dull," Isabel insisted.

"No," admitted Rosamund again, "but then you haven't had the joint without the soup and fish, have

you ? Don't imagine I'm complaining ! Oliver was right and wise from the start, about monogamy for him and me, and I've never regretted it for a moment. But that's fact, not theory. It's time you and I revised theories."

"Well," said Isabel slowly, "there's no great practical difficulty about what you suggest ; but the emotional difficulties are enormous. You realise how different everything will look ? It's a long time since either of us has been inside that room."

The relationship between the Hampstead *ménage* and its fugitive daughters had settled down naturally during the years into something casual and unimportant. Time may not heal, but it can usually numb. As old Mr. Skelton degenerated by inevitable stages into a creature ever more seedy and decrepit, the memory of his main iniquity grew vague. What had filled the horizon and darkened the sky became no more than a nasty memory. The objurgations he would have levelled at Isabel for her way of life were frozen on his lips, first by the sense of his own disgrace, and then by his reverence for her second husband's riches ; actually, the act which might have been expected to make a permanent breach with his children, the betrayal which had led them to regard him with the greatest loathing, had, by rendering him pathetic, almost effected a reconciliation. The daughters could not feel affection, but they could feel pity. Their mother remained, as ever, slightly formidable in acquiescence and aloofness ; her refusal to comment, her apparent satisfaction, had always held a hint of the sardonic. She had told them, from their babyhood, to obey their father :

now that that was out of the question, she had nothing to tell them at all. Leonard and Oliver had been compelled to be somewhat high-handed in curbing the old man's financial vagaries ; they could not afford to have a father-in-law dithering in and out of gaol ; and so, by one of those lapses which must happen and are not noticed, he had become in the result a pensioner on their bounty, and they allowed him to do no more than play at his old games. Round the house in Hampstead now hung the very smell of a decay too negligible to carry its moral lesson : meanness was simply coming into its own.

Nevertheless, the sisters still, singly or together, paid it perfunctory visits. But they stayed downstairs : they took tea like hasty visitors, and like hasty visitors sped away : their cars at the door were symbols of their transience. By common consent, they had never re-visited the glimpses of the sun and moon of youth ; the jasmine might breathe by the window now untended, the dreams of its begetting were dead. Rosamund's proposal had in it, therefore, something that at first sight might have seemed alien to her robustness and impatience of mind ; but she was a practical psychologist : she felt, without erecting into a theory, the value of environment to mood. " Reconstructing the crime," she called the return to the place of confidences. Mrs. Skelton, informed of what was desired, raised her eyebrows, but not with sufficient emphasis to form a comment. The room had not been used for a long time, she observed mildly ; it should be aired and dusted for them ; they could use it when they liked.

A summer evening again, and the jasmine-scent ! Isabel lay half-reclined along the window-seat, in grace and bloom little different from what she had been as a girl, but changed in a fashion more profound than outward looks could register : chastened, hurt, broken in to the perplexities of experiment, but as resolute as in early ignorance. Rosamund was curled at her feet, abandoned to the once-familiar attitude. Over them both lay the cloud of time, that alteration made up half of remembering and half of forgetting, that sense that it is idle to forget or to remember. The hurt of growth is that it cannot be reckoned, even when it has happened : for good or bad, and we know not which is which, something has escaped us, something as little comprehended as foreseen. The sisters felt it, and felt that they were no longer themselves.

" You must tell me," said Rosamund, " how your ideal has worked out in terms of happiness. Don't misunderstand me—I'm not worrying over *your* happiness. I did once—till I learned not to ! One has to accept you as a natural force, and natural forces don't bother about being happy. If you went to the stake, it would break my heart, but I should know it was the proper place for you. But a conception of life can't be true for an isolated person, because persons aren't isolated. Living and loving as you do, you *spread* happiness or unhappiness. Which is it that you spread ? I mean—which is it on the balance ? I know that you have spread both."

" You can't strike balances, and the terms are irrelevant," answered Isabel dreamily.

Rosamund shrugged.

"I know, I know," she said. "But you can't in this world follow a blind instinct to love, any more than you can a blind instinct to idle. A theory involves responsibility for its working out in practice. Now Oliver and I have, through no fault of our own, shirked. We don't believe in compulsory monogamy and all the rest of it, any more than you do : only we happen, by sheer luck, to have fitted into the scheme. We content each other. We're not fools, and we can see that the contentment of two individuals proves nothing. We look round at the lies and deceptions and prostitutions, and are just as much shocked as you are. Nobody *can* believe in the system, except those men and women to whom it's a religious obligation ; and they, like you, consider happiness and unhappiness irrelevant. It's easy to grasp that an individual can submit to cruelty and forgo fulfilment, if he (or she—it's still more often *she*) thinks it's the will of God. But you're not religious. You can't fall back on God. To most people without religion, happiness remains the test. If *you* inflict pain, or suffer it, it must be because you call the pain worth while by some other standard."

"Everybody calls pain worth while by some standard," insisted Isabel. "And anyway you've contradicted yourself, and answered yourself too. You say I'm a natural force. If that means anything, it means that I don't need to justify myself by theory —that I follow my instinct and take the consequences, and that others must take the consequences if they get mixed up with me. But then you go on to ask me for justification. I'll accept the bad logic, because life isn't logical. Only why do you say I'm

not religious? I have my own religion. You don't accuse me of being false to it?"

"O, everybody's got a religion, in some sense," said Rosamund. "That's all right for the person who has it. But ought it to involve others, who may believe something quite different, in its consequences? Especially if those consequences hurt? What you have been doing implies a standard which involves others all the time. Do you really think that doesn't need justifying?"

"Yes, I do really think that doesn't need justifying," said Isabel.

Rosamund sighed.

"Won't you try to justify it, to your little sister, all the same?" she pleaded.

"Well," said Isabel slowly, "I don't know that I shall be very clear, for words aren't my strong line. You've told me so often enough, and I oughtn't to have to tell *you*. But think of it this way. Some sorts of religion insist that we're to take vows which are nonsense on the face of them (for who can possibly promise to go on loving anybody?), and then want to punish us savagely, in this world and the next, for breaking the vows we ought never to have made. Well, clearly we've got to get away from all that!"

"I've never heard you half so eloquent," said Rosamund, leaning back and looking up at her sister in genuine surprise.

"You've asked for it and you're getting it," answered Isabel tranquilly. "Words aren't *my* strong line—but they're Leonard's. I've always known what I thought, but he's taught me how to think it.

Don't you recognise some of the phrases out of *Sense and Sex*?"

"I always told you," retorted Rosamund, "that the only part of that publication which interested me was the naughtiness. However, go on! The voice is the voice of Leonard—to say nothing of Arthur—but the hand is the hand of Isabel. I'm feeding out of it."

"Since I've started," said Isabel, "I may as well go on. Christ taught tolerance—why should so many Christians teach intolerance? Christ forbade us to cast the first stone—why should so many Christians be always casting stones of one sort or another—condemning, or blaming, or finding fault? Christ taught love—there's nothing that many Christians are more afraid of. What I maintain is that, religion for religion, mine is much nearer the general *spirit* of true Christianity than lots of people's. And I'm talking about people who claim to be Christians!"

"Admirably expressed, and reasonably convincing," said Rosamund. "Does it follow that you feel yourself justified in setting a household against itself?"

Isabel smiled, with a smile sadder than usual.

"A house divided against itself cannot stand," she answered. "What is the use of a church's telling us that a house divided against itself *can* stand, and ought to, and has got to be made to?"

"Agreed, agreed," said Rosamund. "I'll give you your case so far. I come back to the fact that you're left with no ideal except human happiness, and I want to know if you're propagating *that*."

"I absolutely deny your 'fact,'" said Isabel

gently, stooping over to caress Rosamund's hair. " I'm left with the ideal of human love, and I don't admit for a moment that you can measure it by its results. Love is an end in itself, not a means to happiness or anything else."

" Agreed again," said Rosamund. " But carry on from the demolition of the churches."

" Well," said Isabel, " after the people who profess what seems to me a false Christianity come the people who don't even profess it but just cling to its taboos. These don't believe marriage is a sacrament, but they want to inflict as much restriction and misery as if it were, without any of the accompanying exaltation. They're the vast majority—the ordinary respectable narrow-minded— 'What recks it them? What need they ? They are sped.' "

" Good, good ! " Rosamund clapped her hands. Then suddenly she became serious.

" I follow you," she said, " but mainly because you've brought yourself up against my own first question. You say the respectables impose misery ; but don't *you* ? You say, by implication, it's wicked to hold two people together in the marriage relation when they no longer love each other. Well, so it is. But doesn't *your* plan involve an unnecessary loosening up of the ties that keep people loving ? You say —again by implication—it's wicked not to allow people to decide for themselves when and how they'll have children. Well, again, so it is, of course. Only—if they think like you, and live like you, won't lots of them abstain from having the children which might bring them and keep them together ? "

" We're right down to it now," said Isabel. " And

my answer is that ties don't keep people loving. You've got to get away from the idea of bondage altogether before love can have its chance."

"Turn to practical consequences," insisted Rosamund. "Talk to me for once as you used to—about your own experiences and your own satisfactions. You 'loved' old Oliver—I'm not speculating how you could, for I know you did. After this length of time, we can face the truth about that (not that you were ever one to funk facing the truth). It was disastrous. You 'loved' Arthur. He's much more of a beast now than he used to be, and directly because of your 'love,' your kind of love. You 'loved' poor little Henry : I can't judge whether what you gave him for a few months was worth the shock of the parting, but he's pretty much of a mess now. And you 'love' Leonard, and Leonard in theory sympathises with your views and shares them : but do you really honestly for one moment think that he would let you put them into practice?"

"He's got to," said Isabel.

Rosamund sat back on her heels, in her former quick childish fashion, and cocked her head on one side in apprehension. The gesture called tears into Isabel's eyes, it brought back the years so vividly.

"Anthony?" asked Rosamund.

Isabel nodded.

"Then God help us all!" said Rosamund.

There was a silence. After a while, Isabel took up the thread of argument.

"If the present system appeared to be justified by results," she said, "I should still feel it was morally wrong. I should still feel it was a giving of promises

that shouldn't be given, and a forcing of emotions that can't be forced, and a denial of the central human spirit. But it *doesn't* appear to be justified by results. It has filled the world with deception and tyranny and cruelty and unhappiness. I don't argue that my way of living has made everybody happy. It hasn't. But neither has any other way. By that test, we arrive nowhere. But I keep on coming back to the fact that I reject the test altogether. You say I have caused disaster. My reply is not that virtuous and monogamous and possessive wives and mothers are causing disaster all round us all the time, though that would be a perfectly sufficient reply, and a perfectly true one : it is simply that I have no choice. I hurt Arthur because he wouldn't have me on the only terms I could offer him—the terms of freedom. I hurt Henry because he couldn't take what I had to give. If I hurt Leonard, it will be because he is false to his own convictions. Am I responsible for that ? "

" We are all false to our own convictions," said Rosamund sombrely.

" We must learn not to be," said Isabel.

" You gentle, loving, responsive women are pretty cruel, aren't you ? " said Rosamund.

" Life is pretty cruel," said Isabel.

" I surrender," said Rosamund. " I've asked my questions and you've answered them—according to your lights. There's just one more point, and then I've finished. You won't deny that there are only twenty-four hours in the day ? "

Isabel looked at her with sisterly suspicion.

" That's a trap," she retorted, " and it's got open

jaws. You mean—suppose Arthur had accepted my terms, and Henry had, and Leonard was accepting them, and Anthony was coming into my life—and then perhaps Tom, Dick and Percy—what's the practical consequence? One hasn't time for everybody : granted. One can't have an indefinite number of lovers (unless one's affairs are very brief and therefore probably very empty) without reducing the whole idea to absurdity : granted again. But isn't that again simply one of the ordinary conditions of life, which in every other connection are accepted? Take the case of a man who's very fond of music. If he has to work hard, and keep up a home, and play with the children, and read books, and go to the seaside for his holidays, he can't give himself up to music and drench himself in it as he'd like to. There are scores of composers clamouring for his attention : he has to concentrate on two or three if he is going to live with them and study them and understand them and know them by heart. As you say, there are only twenty-four hours in the day. But then comes along somebody who has a genius for music, and can give all his time to it. *He* can accommodate a great number of composers. It's the same with literature. It's the same with love. *I* have a genius for loving, and can give all my time to it."

"Composers and literary blokes aren't jealous of one another. Not, at any rate, the dead ones," said Rosamund.

"Jealousy is the enemy we've got to kill, the devil we've got to cast out," said Isabel. "It never hurt *me* that Arthur loved *you*. And Leonard can love as many women as he likes. If he really loves them, it

will only enrich his nature and enlarge his spirit and make him a better lover of myself."

"Go and put it up to him," said Rosamund, "and God go with you!" She rose abruptly, hugged her sister passionately, and went away without another word. She felt the cloud of doom weighing heavily, and recognised that she could do nothing about it.

Isabel, more deliberate, more languid, gathered her things and came downstairs at her leisure, brooding on the truth in Rosamund's foreboding. She took the usual perfunctory leave of her parents, and drove home. It was not late, and Leonard was waiting for her.

"I'll come into your study," she said.

Here too the instinct of place was odd. The study was not a room suitable for domestic talk; there was an unexpressed understanding that nobody, not even Isabel, went into it except at its owner's invitation; and yet Isabel felt that what she had to say must be said there—for it was there that Leonard had made his first confession of love.

They went in, in silence, but neither sat down. They stood one on each side of the small table, and looked at each other for a little while, in silence still. Isabel was pale, and dark under the eyes; a little of the youthful bloom had suddenly left her; she was tired with what she had to do. Leonard, always sensitive, knew that something dreadful was coming. Fear was not a natural emotion to him, but he was afraid.

"I am in love with Anthony Leveridge," said Isabel presently.

"You are in love with me," said Leonard thickly.

"I am," Isabel acquiesced. "Is that an obstacle?"

"Here, in this room," cried Leonard, "when I asked you to be my wife, I told you that I must have all of you, and for always, and for every purpose!"

"I did not marry on conditions," said Isabel simply. "You used, naturally, the language of your emotion: you can't have expected me to set that against what I took to be the faith of a lifetime. And I told you from the first that 'all of me' was too big an order."

Leonard put the palms of his hands on the table and leant forward, trying to control the feeling that ravaged his face. He was too big a man for conventional recrimination, and his love for Isabel was sincere; but in that moment there opened before him the gulf down which a man looks to see that he does not believe what he has always pretended to believe, and that there is no health in him.

"How far has this business with Leveridge gone?" he asked.

"Technically, no way at all," Isabel told him. "You saw us together at the party. We have not met since. But we knew then, and *you* knew then."

"This will smash Leveridge as a politician," said Leonard.

"No," said Isabel, "for it will never be made public. There will be scandal talked, of course—if you can call it scandal when it's true. But there is scandal talked about most politicians, and it does them no harm unless it gets into the courts."

"This will get into the courts," whispered Leonard, sobbing for utterance. "If you give me

cause, I shall divorce you, and cite Leveridge."

"Do you want to punish me," asked Isabel gently and sadly, "for doing what you have always taught was right?"

"It's not punishment, Isabel," said Leonard, still with that pitiful difficulty in his voice. "God knows, I'm not vindictive. God knows, I love you and don't want to hurt you. I want you to be happy. But I can't—I can't—I can't *see* you being happy with somebody else, when I want you to be happy only with me. I can't welcome you back into my arms, when you're flushed and lovely from the arms of another lover. I've been wrong, Isabel—wrong all through—wrong from the beginning. I've been flattering my vanity by posing about something I didn't understand. I'd never been in love—I didn't know what it was like. By God, Isabel"—his voice rose almost to a scream, and he beat the table with the flat of his hand—"if you do this thing, I must have you out of my life, clean out of it, publicly and utterly out of it—I must wash my hands of you, I must wash the scent of you off my hands——"

He stopped, struggling for breath.

"I won't ask you what the world will say," said Isabel, "about a man who makes his name by preaching a certain creed, and then goes back on it when thousands of others have learnt it and suffered because of it and gone through with it——"

"No," interrupted Leonard, "don't ask me that! Do you think I care about the world, if I lose you?"

"I won't ask you it," Isabel persisted, "because I know well enough you've ceased to care about the world. That's a big thing our love has done for you,

don't you think ? But I *will* ask you what your heart will say, if you are false to me."

"I ? False to *you* ?" said Leonard in a whisper of amazement.

"Yes," said Isabel, "it is you who are being false, not I—you who are being false to all we both believe and have lived by."

She turned away wearily and sat down in Leonard's own deep arm-chair. Suddenly he was in front of her, kneeling, abandoned to grief, his face buried deeply in her lap, his body shaken with weeping.

"Have mercy, Isabel !" he cried to her. "I am wrong, I am weak. You have all the right on your side, I admit it—all the right, and all the strength. But, for God's sake, out of your strength, have pity. I cannot bear this."

Isabel laid her hand on his head, and a sort of peace seemed to flow from her integrity to calm his anguish. But it was not integrity that saved him, nor did he rise to her heights. As he knelt there, he saw a picture of himself as the husband great enough to give his wife everything, everything, with both hands. He rose and kissed her and turned away.

"Have your wish," he said, still crying. "Have your lover, and God bless you."

As he walked out of the room, bowed and tottering, Isabel saw for the first time that he was beginning to be an old man.

# CHAPTER VII

## SCANDAL AND TRAGEDY

Then indeed the storm of scandal broke. If Isabel had been notorious before, she was now more than famous. Never was a light-of-love, Rosamund said, less hidden under a bushel ; but she said it wistfully as well as gaily, for she knew that in Isabel's ardours there was nothing light. Few public men were so much in the public eye as Lake and Leveridge : the arrived financier, the arriving politician. Both were handsome, witty, men of culture and distinction ; known to everybody, welcomed by everybody. Their speeches were reported : their features were familiar from cartoons. Heads turned to regard them at first nights. And now, suddenly, appetisingly to the tongue of talk, they seemed poised at opposing corners of the old triangle, with Isabel, lovely and serene, for apex. There had never been any secrecy about Lake's professed views : they were indeed his main instrument of publicity : there was naturally, now, a cynical eagerness to discover if he was capable of living up to them. Both the austere and the frivolous were agog for a breach between promise and performance : the former, because the wicked should have their sins brought home to them : the latter, because a joke's a joke, especially against a man who has been accustomed to play the joker. Besides, there is an almost universal taste for a *cause célèbre* : it lends a colour.

Few people wished Leveridge ill. For so successful a man, he had excited astonishingly little envy. He bore his honours so modestly, and was so companionable, that even the malignant hesitated to blacken him ; yet it could not but be felt that, in annexing the most advertisably beautiful woman of his time, on top of all his other achievements, he was striking a rash head against vengeful stars, and challenging the watchful gods to bring him down. As for Isabel, her very sincerity, her detachment, her freedom from the tricks and mannerisms which commonly accompany notorious seductiveness, excited an adverse feeling. She seemed to take too much for granted. (And so, indeed, she did—but not in the fashion with which she was credited : it was not to be expected that her deep and unshakable humility should be understood.)

To crown the sense of drama, there was the size of the stakes. Lake was known to be working for a gigantic merger, one of the biggest things of its kind in the history of finance, an attempt to combine in one vast organisation many fields of production, and manufacturing powers, and as yet unexhausted haunts of potential purchase—a world within a world, an international economic unit which, in accordance with his well-known and unrelaxed economic ideals, should subsist by taking in its own washing (as in the last resort, he argued, every economic unit must), and so cut across the slumping tendency that already threatened disaster to the nations. The general public, little interested in the theory behind the design, was ready enough to be impressed by the magnitude of the figures : rows of

noughts that might almost be said to run away into infinity, leaving the dazed imagination behind. And the personal element was obvious : Lake, one of the few magnates who became increasingly rich amid the chaos of falling prices and shrinking markets, was, it was felt, the man to do such a deal if it could in any way be done. Shake *his* credit, even his purely personal credit, even in the matter of his private relationship with his own wife, and the reverberations would spread to the Great Lakes and to Coromandel. What then was he doing, acquiescing in open shame? And which course would be the more shameful for him—acquiescence or protest? Could he afford to go into court? Could he afford to keep out of it? There is a common sourness of mind, for which the conception of the cuckold is an invitation to sniggers. The unpossessive husband is confused with the ignominious fool. Was the great Sir Leonard Lake going to enact such a part—and how, if at all, was he going to be able to avoid it?

Even more dramatic was the position of Leveridge. He was younger ; he had more to win—and therefore, in one sense, more to lose. Certainly a future Cabinet Minister, probably a future Premier—if only he kept his head—was he *losing* his head, hitherto regarded as so conspicuously screwed on the adequate way? Granted Isabel's intoxicating beauty, granted the glamour of a romantic love, could what he was doing be conceivably worth while? And what in fact *was* he doing?—what risk was he running?—what elements in the situation, unknown to others, were present to that airily adventurous mind?

Was there some ugly pact, for mutual advantage, between the flouted husband and the brazen lover? Or was the latter pirouetting on the threshold of disaster, forgetful of his career and his duties, merely besotted and bemused?

They were about everywhere, either the three of them together, or a provocative two. The illustrated papers were full of them. "Sir Leonard and Lady Lake, with Mr. Anthony Leveridge, at Newmarket." —"Lady Lake and Mr. Leveridge, at Henley. (Inset, Sir Leonard Lake)."—Gossip was so rife on tongues that it could scarcely be kept from print.

Lady Elizabeth Purley sought out Mrs. Leveridge, in malicious kindliness, but met more than her match.

"My husband is a man of affairs," said the brisk wife in an unexpected epigram.

"It is a question whether he can afford to be," said Lady Elizabeth grimly.

"I should have thought," said Mrs. Leveridge, not to be outdone in grimness, "that those of your political way of thinking would rejoice to see my husband making a fool of himself."

"I am here," replied Lady Elizabeth austerely, "not as a political enemy but as a private friend. I have known Anthony for a great many years—you may remember that I gave him a picture, indicative of idealism, for a wedding-present—and I am very far from rejoicing when I see him heading for ruin."

"I do not consider that he is heading for ruin," said Mrs. Leveridge placidly. "So long as it is obvious that he and I remain on good terms, and that Leonard and Isabel do the same, it is surely nobody's business but our own."

"It is everybody's business," Lady Elizabeth insisted. "It is a question of the common standard. Do you really suggest that Leonard Lake is not disgraced by the role of complacent husband? Don't *you* feel disgraced by the role of complacent wife?"

"You go too fast," Mrs. Leveridge told her. "I am not admitting what you choose to regard as guilty relations between my husband and poor Isabel, who, incidentally, has always seemed to me a little weak in the head. And, as for the ideal of complacency, it is one that I have always striven after—so far, I am afraid, without great success. I should be gratified to think I was attaining it now. However, thank you for your nice interference."

This last sentence, if in the circumstances forgivable, was certainly unwise. It sent a malicious gossip-monger back to her favourite pursuit in a state of inflammation: the fever spread, more rapidly than ever, from that infected point. But perhaps there was in any case little scope for less or more in the almost universal hubbub of comment and curiosity. The only cure for such social strains is time; and the best thing to be said for it is that it works quickly. Had the issue been scandal and scandal alone, it would have died in a few weeks of its own monotony. You cannot keep on telling the same story about the same people with the same excitement for very long, especially when there is no spice of contradiction. The odd situation would have been accepted, but for the existence of one powerful person who was determined not to accept it.

To Arthur the new development came as an

intimate and ultimate insult, corroding the blood. He had wanted, without knowing how or why or in what relationship he wanted, both Isabel and Rosamund : he had had to reconcile himself to frustration there, and, though of all men he was least amenable to frustration, he had endured and gone on. He had wanted Rosamund alone—again, he did not know how : but in this case he knew why. He had wanted to hurt, to possess, to humiliate her : and he had not been allowed to. He had wanted Isabel in a more human and straightforward fashion : and she had left him. The accumulated bitterness had worked in his veins towards a veritable insanity. Outwardly, he had not greatly changed. The roughness of his manner, the boorishness of his speech, the frank selfishness of his intentions, had indeed served as a cover for the dark and bubbling ills within. He could vent spleen in little ways, without exciting surprise or suspicion : it was "only old Arthur" after all ! But his anger, his sense of a grotesque wrong in the world, of something that denied to him what others saw in beauty and hoped of love, grew and fed upon itself. Most of all did he resent the appearance of generosity—the detachment of which he knew that he fell short. His tolerance towards Leonard—his tolerance towards Leonard even as Isabel's husband—had been based upon a sort of contempt. The man was a humbug, he believed : a profound, a subtle and a polished humbug, but fundamentally as diseased as himself : and the testing-time would prove them even. Yet here was his enemy successfully pretending to act up to professed principles—a process unanticipated and unendurable !

Some deep instinct told him that the pretence, however successful, was *only* a pretence, but he craved for the satisfaction of demonstration. He looked hungrily for signs of anguish and wreck: many people were looking for those: but Leonard was too clever for them. His pink and smiling mask was unpuckered; his opulence of mood and achievement was as superb as ever; only to Isabel, only in moments when they were alone together, was it apparent that he was in some internal spring of action changed and broken; and she, though she could never harden her heart, could never soften it. Arthur, watching, saw in Isabel the blossoming of excitement and delight, and thought he saw in Leonard the perfect pose of indifference. For long he had kept away from them: forced to confer with Leonard on business, he had refused social intercourse, had even as much as possible avoided the house in Park Lane, insisting that the proprietor of his paper should come to Fleet Street to see him. (The gesture of acquiescence was an easy one for Leonard.) Now, however, Arthur went where the others went, accepted their invitations, joined in their pursuits. He must watch and watch! He could not keep his eyes from them, nor his thoughts. They came back upon him in dreams. And yet sometimes he felt that he hated Leveridge most—the man who took smiling what, in every department of life, he himself had had to fight for savagely, and had either lost or not enjoyed.

Suddenly, on an impulse, he laid hold of Rosamund. Half-knowing what he planned, he had the sense that, in her presence, he would get the knowledge clear, and would be able to savour in advance

the harm he meant to compass. He hated Isabel, he hated Leonard, he hated Anthony, and wished them ill ; but no triumph would mean anything to him ultimately unless it involved the hurting and humbling of Rosamund. For her he not only hated, but still loved.

" Come," he said to her carelessly one evening at a dull party, where he was roaming about and biting his nails—" leave this foul affair and come along to Fleet Street with me. I've got to get back to the office anyway, and I'll show you how a paper is run."

Rosamund came. She even came gladly. She had not really diverged from her girlish feeling about Arthur. She still admired his manly cleverness ; she still thought of him as more grown-up than herself : she was still grateful for a kind word from him. Her friends would have said that her emotional life was satisfied by her husband and children ; but, in fact, emotional life can never be satisfied, for it is a well that renews and overflows itself, and makes even satisfaction into a new demand. Again, her friends would have said that she was sharp, humorous, a little contemptuous, in her personal relations ; but that mode of self-expression is often the balance of a carefully-controlled capacity for romanticism, and Arthur had got into Rosamund's spirit when she was an undeveloped and unprotected child. The long severance, the evident animosity, had been pain to her ; the suggestion of renewed friendship was something more vivid than pleasure.

Her ironic side found satisfaction in the obsequiousness with which her companion was received,

when his car had taken them to the *Comet's* colossal home. This was a new, blatant, vulgar building ; it dominated Fleet Street, shouting and flaming at its rivals. The porter, a giant glittering in braid and medals, seemed almost stupefied with pride when he opened the door to the editor ; lift-boys ran breathless, bells rang, secretaries appeared and were dismissed without speech, the whole scurry of the mechanism faltered on a breath. This is not the invariable, or indeed the usual, effect of an editor's entrance ; but Rosamund did not know that. It was part of the atmosphere of portent created by Lake for all his concerns ; and it amused Rosamund extremely to see her dishevelled and unnoting Arthur as its victim and dictator.

" This is the sanctum," said Arthur moodily, waving his arm round his editorial room. He pitched his hat and coat on a chair, picked up a pile of proofs that lay on his table, glanced at the headings, and stood absorbed, forgetful of Rosamund's presence. (" The old Arthur indeed ! " her heart said to her, with delight.) He made some marks, rang some bells, sent some messengers flying with galley-proofs streaming behind them.

" Come on," he said to Rosamund, seeing her again ; and strode off along a corridor. He tapped at a door labelled " News-Editor," and poked in his nose.

" Forgive me, Meredith," he apologised to a large man sitting at a large desk. " This is Mrs. Heyday. She wants to know how we do things. Are you busy ? "

" Of course I'm busy," replied Meredith calmly.

"Mrs. Heyday mustn't go away with the notion that anybody in a newspaper office is ever anything but frantic. Here, Mrs. Heyday"—he rose and offered her a chair—"is the hub of the organisation. Most men in my position would call it the hub of the universe : but I am too old at the game for that. To this room comes the news from the four winds : agencies send it, and correspondents, and it comes by rail and motor and under the water and through the air. Very exciting!" He gathered in his huge hands a mass of scribblings. "I send out people to get this sort of stuff, and when they bring it in I assess its merits." He threw several sheets into the waste-paper basket, and rang for a boy to take away the rest. "When I have carefully made my decisions, based on unrivalled experience and infallible intuition, this fellow Benson chips in and alters them. It's a dog's life."

"Come on," said Arthur again, and rushed Rosamund along another corridor. They came to a very big room, over which presided a grey and gentle ghost. Numbers of young men sat at desks facing him, rather like the sixth form of a school : all had paper in front of them, and were either writing or cutting to pieces the writings of others. Most used black pencils, some blue : a few wrote with fountain pens.

"This is Mr. Baker, our Chief Sub-Editor," said Arthur, making the introduction. The ghost smiled wearily but charmingly, and, as he rose to greet Rosamund, took the opportunity to hand out to his subordinates a bunch of telegrams and an order.

"Here," he said, "is the hub of the organisation.

All the news of the world comes to me here—canalised, of course, through Mr. Meredith, our News-Editor—and I assess its worth. Then Mr. Benson interferes. It's a happy day for us, Mrs. Heyday, when we can get the Editor off the premises."

"I'll go away now," said Arthur obligingly. "Come along, Rosamund. Good-bye for the moment, Baker—see you later."

"I was afraid of it," answered the ghost, and sat down, shaking his head.

Arthur led Rosamund past a number of doors, each labelled with a private name.

"All gone home," he said briefly.

Outside a door with "Night-Editor" on it he paused for a moment, and then shook his head and passed on.

"Macgregor," he explained. "A genius, like myself—only of course less so. And almost as disagreeable. I won't let him know I've come back."

Further on, he opened the way into an apartment approximately as large as the sub-editor's home, and similarly occupied ; but of this he allowed Rosamund only the barest glimpse.

"Sport—wouldn't interest a woman," he explained ; and Rosamund, who played every game by nature better than Arthur could have learnt to play it in a lifetime, followed him, smiling to herself. They were carried up several flights in a lift, and he ushered her into a busy place that clanked with the whirr of machinery and stank of printer's ink. Here he made her known to the Printer, a grave, dry, handsome gentleman in his shirt-sleeves, and to the

Man at the Desk, who, with a large pair of scissors, cut up the material which the sub-editors' room had sent to him, and allotted the "takes" to the men working the linotypes. These mechanicians, skilled and concentrated, clattered away without taking notice of her, and the lines of lead dropped neatly out, were carried to the side in sets, put together for short "pulls"—with which inky boys rushed down to the readers—and ultimately fashioned into pages on the "stone." Over the "stone" presided hands of incredible neatness and rapidity : the owners of the hands were of a status to argue minor points of fitting with a sub-editor who stood, coatless, sheaves of proofs in his grasp, completing the miracle of "making-up." Rosamund saw a page completed, the case-hands bringing the headings through separately to be placed and spaced ; she saw the page locked into its steel frame : she saw it pushed through a lifted trap-door into a fiery department smelling of hell.

"Come round to the foundry," snapped Arthur ; and there, already bewildered and with an inclination to headache, Rosamund stood in a temperature like that of a ship's furnace-room, to watch half-naked athletes, pouring with sweat, fashion, from the impress of the metal sheet, a hollow semi-circular metal object, fit to be taken down and clamped on the rotary machines below. And so to the basement, where the tremendous rotaries themselves stood, idle for the moment between two editions, but soon to be trembling and roaring at an electric touch. Artificers scrambled about them fitting the plates ; a vast roll of paper was affixed at

one end ; and, when the actual printing-off began, Rosamund—deafened now by an atmosphere of thunder—saw the wise machine, far less fallible than a thinking human being, draw the paper to itself, whirl it over the metal pages to take the imprint in right order, fold and cut and fit the sheets, and deliver a great organised spate of completed newspapers, in carefully divided bunches, into an awaiting trough.

" It's like a miracle," she said, turning to Arthur with shining eyes.

" It *is* a miracle," he corrected her. " Come along."

And suddenly they were out again in the cool street.

" All modern manufacture is a miracle to those who see it for the first time," was Arthur's comment. " The really miraculous thing is how the folly of the human race manages to waste the product of its ability." He waved towards the waiting car.

" I suppose," he said, " you want to go back to that ghastly party and collect your husband ? Get in—I'll take you."

As they were driven silently through the silent streets, he turned to her and put his hand on hers.

" Rosamund," he said, " will you kiss me again—after all these years ? "

It was the first time, since childhood, that she had heard his voice tremble ; it was the first time she had ever heard the note of humility in it.

" Of course, Arthur—I want to," she answered ; she put her arms round him and kissed him, letting her lips caress his quietly for a few seconds : then

she drew down his head to rest upon her breast. For a little, the old peace seemed to envelop them. Presently, but without his usual brusqueness, Arthur drew away. When he spoke again, he had changed back ; there was the familiar note of rather devilish raillery in his voice.

"What strikes you most about the apparatus you've just seen ?" he asked.

"The speed and the power," answered Rosamund.

"Yes, yes !" cried Arthur on a chuckle. "The speed and the power—two things that have always appealed to me ! Do you realise how one man who knew his job could set the world by the ears, using that power at that speed—could let out secrets that could never be recalled ?"

"I know it has been done," replied Rosamund composedly. "What I'm wondering is whether you are precisely the right person for a knowledge of the job."

Arthur laughed, and they did not speak further. But, when he handed her out at their destination, he looked at her with an expression that surprised her : she would have called it wistful, if such a word could have been used in connection with such a man. And she came to think, afterwards, that there had been tears in his eyes; but she could not see clearly, for there were certainly tears in her own.

He did not follow her up the steps, but stood on the pavement, looking after her. As he did so, Isabel and Anthony came out together. There was no disguise about their relationship ; they were wrapped up in each other, intoxicated by each other ; they were gazing at each other with the world-forgetting

rapture of lovers. Arthur turned away, quick and haggard, and climbed back into his car.

He found at his office a message, asking him to ring up Sir Leonard Lake. So Leonard had gone home early, leaving Anthony to squire Isabel ! A strange state of affairs !—and yet by now not strange ! Arthur seized his receiver and was put through.

" Could you come round about four o'clock to-morrow ? " asked Leonard's pleasant voice—" or shall I come to see you ? Altamont is arriving from Paris in the morning, and the whole thing will be signed up. I don't want anything out early enough for the evening papers, but I'd like to discuss the *Comet* splash with you."

" Come if you like," said Arthur, with more than the usual brutality in his tone, and yet something like exultation too. He rang off abruptly, and sent for his chief mechanical officer.

" I may be getting a rather special story in to-night, about half-way through the run of the London edition," he said. " If that materialises, I shall want to slip the front page. I'm stopping myself to handle it : I'm not keeping any of the editorial staff. I shall need one case-hand and two men on the linos, and of course one for make-up—picked men, who can be absolutely trusted not to talk. The readers can go. You'll have to make the necessary arrangements in the foundry and machine-room, but nothing's to be said to anybody except to the minimum that *must* be kept—and every man that's trusted is to be put on his honour to hold the secret. This may be going to be the biggest scoop in the history of the paper. I leave it to you."

Alone again, Arthur lit a cigar, and sat down to write with eagerness and concentration. So much did he love the sensation of a splash that, as he worked, his personal venom seemed for once almost to be sublimated or transcended, and he fashioned his effects with an artist's joy. His head-lines were simple —he could see them, in imagination, bringing a goggle into scores of thousands of faces at next morning's breakfast-tables : he could feel the stir, the bewilderment, the gasp, the thrill : he could hear the wires humming away, could sense the wireless trembling across seas and continents.—" Society Scandal."—" Sir Leonard Lake Files Petition."—" Famous Statesman Named as Co-Respondent."—" Lake *v.* Lake and Leveridge."—" Postponement of Greatest Merger of Modern Times."—" Repercussions in World-Finance." Arthur licked his lips, and his hot, bloodshot eyes kindled. His nerves and veins told him that this was the moment to which his whole life had pointed, that here was the colossal lie he was born to tell. He envisaged disaster, pain, ruin, starvation, humiliation, spreading outwards like circles in a pond, from this stone that his hand alone had the power to throw. And he reflected that, at last, he was able to hurt Rosamund.

A little after two o'clock, he read through his manuscript and strolled up with it to the composing-room. The arrangements were made, and he observed them functioning with slickness. Then he went back to his own office, locked the door, took a revolver out of his drawer, and sat down at his desk.

" Poor Leonard ! " he said aloud, though his lips were shaking slightly. " Doomed by his vanity

always to take up one pose after another! He'll never live this down. He'll never really get going again on the grand scale. But he'll never admit to himself that he's finished. He'll never see himself as a figure of fun. He'll have to get rid of Isabel after this : he won't be able to bear the sight of her : his pride won't stand the smash. And he'll just go on getting lonelier, and grosser, and shakier ; and, even when his head is in the dust, he'll pretend that he's hitting up the stars with it. As for me, thank God, I've got nothing to lose, and I can afford to indulge my genuine taste for the melodramatic."

But he sat on for a long time, fingering the pistol, remembering early days in Hampstead with Isabel and Rosamund, and conscious that he must not risk the sound of a shot until the deadly papers were distributed beyond recall.

# CHAPTER VIII

## SORROW AND LOVE

Despite the armies of pleasure-seekers who haunt the hills and shores of the North Mediterranean, dashing dangerously along the Corniche in high-powered cars—splashing themselves like beds of gaudy flowers, laid out in dazzling and bewildering patterns by some insolent schemer, on the beaches of Nice and Juan-les-Pins—or growing pale and haggard in the angry atmosphere of the gaming-rooms at Monte Carlo—there are still on that coast a few quiet haunts, a few unfrequented bays, a few retreats where lovers, undisturbed, may watch the moon.

Anthony and Isabel had found such a place, and, in the discovery of each other's perfections, forgot the hubbub they had left behind. Isabel was still young, and Anthony was not yet old. Both had known love : both felt they had never known love like this—and indeed every love-affair is unique and absolute, a cloistered corner of Heaven. The past, the world of social obligation and political disturbance, which so recently had thundered upon their ears like a sea in storm, had retreated now like a tide moon-drawn into the distance, and scarcely a whisper of it was heard along the pebbles. They did not forget : the sensitive soul can never forget, but for its own refreshment it must at times ignore. Isabel did not forget Rosamund, or Leonard, or Arthur,

or the claims and clamours she had courted and provoked ; Anthony did not forget his wife, or the vast ambitions which had once been like instruments and playthings in his hand. But all that was subdued and dimmed : none of it could violate their fortress.

For Isabel, the situation was easy. It was apt to her character. It was essential to her career. She had rarely doubted or questioned, and she was not likely to begin now, when the nerves of her soul and body seemed at once to be comforted and to expand, like flowers in sunshine, like flowers in rain—drawing sustenance, drawing ecstasy, from soil and air. There is an indifference, a nonchalance, of the cynic ; there is a nonchalance, not an indifference, of the saint. The cry of human suffering is so insistent that he whose ears are always open to it must go mad : some seek protection in the stopping of their ears, some in a sense of ultimate justification. Isabel's faith, whether well founded or ill, was simple and lovely. It was not the result of learning, of which she had little, or of egoism, for which her spirit had small room. She did not shirk anguish, whether her own or other people's : but she drank the wine of respite without stint or shame. This that she was doing was, for her, right and perfect. She did not injure it with questions.

Anthony's case was harder. He was, if not more subtle, at least more complex. He had far greater range of intellect and desire ; he was weaker, more trivial, more vulnerable, more troubled by calculation and reserve. And yet, as human beings go, he was singularly uncalculating. Less than Isabel, but more than most people, he could accept and enjoy the moment. He had never striven—he had never

had to strive—for the prizes which he could accordingly abandon without reluctance. He had always done what he wanted : he was doing what he wanted now. If he had been given the choice over again, he would have chosen Isabel before power or money or fame. He had, quite literally, no regrets. If his conscience sometimes solicited him, demanding whether he had been in politics for his own sake or his neighbours'—enquiring what had become of the causes he had pleaded so eloquently, the measures of social service he had honestly believed in and sought to compass—he answered, with equal honesty, that the individual can do only what he must. To talk of having " chosen," indeed, he would have argued, was beside the point. It was not that he had been given a choice between Isabel and politics, and taken Isabel : it was simply that he and Isabel had met. The stars in their courses, having brought together two people with so utter a need, presumably knew their business. There was no fighting against fate.

Besides, even in the lower range of material considerations, it was not true that a dilemma had been presented to him. So far as his original intimacy with his beloved went, he had no doubt deliberately—or with that fatal certainty which abjures deliberation —invited risks ; but, in the final crash, he had had no hand whatever. Who could have foreseen that another man's maniacal resentment would lead to false disclosure, to suicide, to reverberating and unappeasable scandal ? The public disaster had happened to him as other things had happened—popularity, athletic success, opportunity and power. There was, perhaps, a sum to be done. Beyond doubt, he

could say to himself, sexual freedom is not nowadays held in the abhorrence of fifty, of forty, of thirty, of twenty, even of ten, years ago : to that extent Leonard's propaganda had reflected and created truth. There were conspicuously divorced men in conspicuous public positions : there had always been men of notoriously loose life in higher positions still ; but at last some degree of honesty had come to the recognition of this problem. The special circumstances were unfortunate : on the other hand, the public memory was short. Leonard Lake on the one part, his own wife on the other, could be trusted to follow the dictates of magnanimity : two undefended suits would set Isabel and himself free to marry, and why should he not then return to political life ? He had often, as a boy, heard it said that even Parnell could have come back, if he had been willing to lie low and wait the hour ; and opinion had certainly broadened since the days of Parnell. If Anthony did not occupy himself overmuch with speculation about recovery and re-establishment, it was not because there was no case to consider, no hope to entertain : on the contrary, it was because, at the moment, he was enjoying to the full stretch his need of living for the moment—he did not concern himself with the future, because he did not want the future to concern itself with *him*. He refused to be troubled. Something had happened. Its consequences were partly unpleasant, or might have been held so, if one had irrelevantly gauged them against mere pleasure ; but the main consequence—that here he was with Isabel, and the sunlight and the moonlight on the sea—swamped all others with such completeness that no

balance asked to be struck. Like Isabel, he was expanding, blooming, savouring fulfilment. Let the rest be and do and bring what it would !

Where he differed from his love was not in indifference to the future : it was in the capacity wholly to accept the present. Here again, his power was more than most people's, but less than hers. With all his radiant health, his ease, his gaiety, he could not turn his sight entirely outwards. In the stir of public affairs, he had been able to appear to do so : he was always being charming to a whole circle ; and the task sufficed. But here, confined to passion, curbed within the quality of love, he developed an inquisitiveness barely this side of the restless. He had often been in love, but never before in love so much. What did it mean ? What did it portend ? What was it doing to him ? What would it make of him ? What —in no sordid sense, but spiritually, permanently— was he getting out of it ? He was feverish sometimes in his love-making, as if fulfilment itself involved frustration : he would gaze into Isabel's eyes as though seeking enlightenment, and would find there only the calm of pure content.

They lived in a villa on a crag. They had, for every reason, to have a place to themselves. Hotel-life, under the eyes of curious strangers, for two people whose photographs had been prominent in the newspapers for years, was not to be faced. It is true that there do exist hotels, and not less, perhaps, in the south of France than in other places, where the notorious may foregather with others in like case, and, for the best of reasons, nobody throws stones, or raises eyebrows : but Anthony and Isabel had

little taste for such resorts, or for such company. Spiritually, they were alone together in an untainted world : they desired to be the same in physical fact. To them, their adventure was pure and exquisite and full of poetry : the notoriety was only incidental. (They had enough humour to admit that every case is a special one, to the persons specially engaged !) Their villa, then, stood isolated, or joined to the noisy movements of the continent by a lane so narrow and stony that their car could hardly be driven along it. To the left and east, the pine-woods stretched across a shoulder of cliff which hid civilisation : to the right and west curved round their private bay. The sun and moon came up for them early in the morning and evening, and made across seas half-tranquil, half-fretful, broad paths of various gold. When the moon waned, the purple sky was patterned with a profusion of vivid stars. The scent of the pine-trees and the high notes of the cicalas helped, evening after evening, to make an atmosphere fit for the intoxication of love. It was the perfect life, Isabel felt, and gave herself to perfection. It was the perfect life, Anthony said—and wondered sometimes how long it was going to last, and what it would lead to.

They slept in different rooms. Such, at least, was fastidious theory, with which warm practice did not always coincide. It is lovely for the lover to expect arrival : but, to create the expectation, there must be parting first ; and sometimes the parting could not be endured. Anthony, however, was both artist and epicure in emotion ; he had no notion of blunting the edge of desire ; and Isabel, to whom in any case the body was never more than the vehicle of the

soul, who found joy in surrender whether to caresses or to moods, followed him and answered him in thought and imagination, taking by giving, in a continual ecstasy.

One side of life—the intellectual—seemed temporarily quiescent. They read almost nothing : they discussed nothing except love. Over and over again the sacred and foolish sentences would spring to their lips, and the " Do you love me ? "—" You know I love you ! " of early passion came the more divinely fresh from the deeps of experience. But, for the most part, they did not talk. Anthony's life had been full of talking : if he had to listen to somebody's voice, he would say, he preferred it to be his own. Now, he was happy to be still. Hour after hour he would lie almost naked in the sun, drinking in the calm and vigour of that ablution, washed by the rays till the joy of cleanness tingled through him, and turning, every few minutes, to watch Isabel's easy poses, as she, almost naked too, stretched and curled like a contented animal beside him. The Mediterranean, inexplicably cold one day and warm another, and grateful to the senses in either case, shone green and clear below them : a brief scramble down the rocks, and the sun-washings were rivalled by bright embraces of the sea. To go in was thrilling, and so was to come out : how fortunate it was, said Anthony, that one course led inescapably to the other ! And often, as they basked and dreamed, he, or she, would murmur the question : " Do you love me ? "—and always the answer : " You know I love you ! " would seem to be spoken for the first time.

" Do you remember," said Isabel one day, as they

lay together under the noonday sun, " telling me that you had two subjects—your childhood and your ambitions ? "

" I remember every word I ever said to you, my blessed," answered Anthony. " How sweet the words ' Do you remember ? ' sound ! "

" They are lovers' words," answered Isabel : " I think we have forgotten all the words that do not belong to lovers."

" All the words, and all the things," said Anthony. " I have not two subjects any longer. I have only one."

" Do you want me to ask what it is ? "—Isabel's question came on a breath : he could not have heard it if he had not known what it was.

" Ask me, ask me, beloved ! " he whispered back to her.

" What is your one subject, Anthony, my darling ? " said Isabel, lower still.

" Little fool, it is Isabel," said Anthony, and they turned towards each other for the confirmation of kisses. Presently, forcing herself free from his arms, Isabel went back to her insistence upon recollection.

" Do you ever want to talk to me about your childhood now, or your ambitions ? " she pressed him.

" Yes, yes—and no," he told her. " It's the old paradox of love. I want to tell you everything—everything. I want to pour out to you the best thoughts I've had, and the worst : to search my spirit for you, and lay it bare, and know that it is dear to you even at its basest. And yet I don't want

to tell you anything at all, for there is nothing that could ever need to be told. Your eyes don't allow of ignorance, my sweetheart ; the wisdom that lives in that light is perfect, and words seem an insult before it. What shall I say to you, my own, my dearest, that your heart has not said already ? "

" It's a paradox truly," murmured Isabel, her quiet lips touched at last to poetry ; " for I too know that silence is best, and I can live with your past years in thought, and know them better than if I had watched them one by one. And yet I want to hear, I want to see in a cruder sense than that ! Words help pictures, and I want to have the pictures of you as you were when you were small—I want to share the things in your life that I have missed, to know about the imbecilities and the disappointments and the shames, so that we can laugh about them together because now they don't hurt you any more——"

" It's a good game," agreed Anthony, " and we can go on playing it for a long, long time. It's amazing, the little odd memories that crop up to meet that appeal—I could paint for you now, in detail, incidents I had forgotten, silly trivial things that perhaps I *wanted* to forget, because they *were* silly and trivial and a man likes posing to himself. And I could search you, I could search your mind for recollection as I search your eyes for dreams—I can see you a little girl, a growing girl, a girl half-awake on the frontier of experience—but I, like you, want to hear about it in words, I want the reassurance of what I know, I want to comfort you to-day for the hurts that made you cry when you were tiny——"

" They sent me away to school when I was tiny," said Isabel. " That made me cry more than anything else has, before or since. Will you comfort me for being homesick when I was a little girl, Anthony ? "

He turned and took her in his arms, and she was comforted. They were happy murmuring reminiscence, and ambition was not spoken of again for a while.

But later, in the time of moonlight, which is the lovers' time more than any hour between dawn and sunset, Isabel returned to that subject of what was to come. Her motive was not fear or curiosity ; neither emotion had a place in her mind. To her, past and future existed only as means to the full savouring of the present. Because Anthony had spoken to her in one breath of his childhood and his ambitions, she let her thoughts linger caressingly over this dream and that, she accepted them as shy and thrilling elements in her present and absorbing dream. She loved with the fire and completeness which could not distinguish desire from satisfaction : as her body savoured the excitement of meeting her lover's, and, not less, the lovely lapses and languors in which excitement was recalled and expected, so every essence of her mind and spirit craved for unity, for mingling, and for peace only as the recreation between two glories. It was necessary for her to feel mind mixed with mind, spirit with spirit—in the present. Speech was a poor instrument for such achievement, but it was one of the instruments offered, and could not be quite neglected.

" Look, beloved," she said, as they sat out in the quiet and darkness during the hour before bed-time,

and gazed across the glittering waters—" look how calm the sea is, and restless too ! "

" Like our love," said Anthony, smiling and reaching out his hand for hers. She knew his smile, though his face, so close and dear, was scarcely visible.

" The night is full of the images of our love," said Isabel. " It remembers the day and expects the morning."

" Say rather," answered Anthony, playing with her fingers and letting his thoughts play as gently with her thoughts, " that the night can afford to forget the day, and to ignore the morning. The night is sufficient to itself, when it is our night of love."

" *Everything* is an image of love, of such love as ours," said Isabel. " Everything is complete in itself, and reaches beyond itself to infinity. Everything contains, and everything implies. Have you not the fancy sometimes that our happiness goes out from us over the world, like a wind carrying the clouds that nourish, or a flight of birds that scatter seed? Surely this is what we all came into the world to find, and, if any two people find it, the rest have a share in the richness."

" I should regret that fancy," laughed Anthony, " if I thought it was meant to justify perfection. My creed has always been that perfection justifies itself."

" Yes, yes," said Isabel. " I am not struggling for explanations of contentment—I am merely content. But peace harbours fancies, that fulfil it and do not disturb it."

" Look," said Anthony, " —a shooting star ! "

They turned and stared at each other in the gloom, trying to make out the mutual mystery of features intimately known.

"Did you wish?" asked Isabel presently, tightening her hold upon his hand.

"Love has room for superstitions," answered Anthony. "Yes, I wished. But I am wishing all the while. When you are with me, my whole life is like a prayer."

"You must not tell me your wish in words, because that breaks the spell," said Isabel gravely. "But I may guess it. I think it was a wish for my happiness, as mine—but I mustn't give you the terms of it—was a wish for yours."

"Your happiness—with *me*," said Anthony simply.

"But you must wish for yourself as well," insisted Isabel. "Remember that peace contains action. Remember that I love, in this moment, all the years that lie ahead of you, and everything that you are going to be and do."

"I don't care," Anthony told her, "if I am nothing and do nothing."

"Ambition will re-awake," said Isabel with assurance. "I have always known you as ambitious—I do not think of you as changed in essentials by our love, but only as more yourself, more real and vital and aware. That's why I spoke this afternoon of the *two* subjects you once told me you liked to talk about—the life you lived once, the life you are going to live. They are part of the present self I know. They don't take you away from me—they give beauty to the sense in which you belong to me. I am glad I did not know you as a child—I am glad I have things to

discover and brood over. Every dream you had, every sorrow you suffered, is like a baby at my breast, and I can nourish it and cheer it. And it's just in that sense, too, that I am glad we don't know how things will work out in the future—there's a universe, an infinity, for exploration—I cannot tell which way you are going, or what you will attain ; but to-night it is all mine, because we are lovers to-night."

" It will be all yours always," said Anthony.

Isabel shook her head.

" We don't know," she said softly. " And beauty lies in not knowing. The moment we try to fetter anything, we lose it. There is only one kind of possession that is tolerable, and that is possession in love ; and it is perfect because it is a perfect freedom."

" I feel no freedom," said Anthony in a changed voice, and she felt through the darkness the startled look that came into his eyes.

" Not free ? My darling, you are free utterly ! "—She pressed the truth upon him—" I should be ashamed, bitterly ashamed, if I felt the love I gave you did not enfranchise. It sets the horizons so far away that we can never reach them, and you can go adventuring, and I can go adventuring, and nothing makes any difference to the joy and perfection we have. The horizons are contracted to this kiss."

She drew him towards her, and their embrace was long and full of the ecstasy of union and the heartbreak of impermanence. To Isabel, whose life and genius were in giving, the sense of surrender would have been complete satisfaction, but that she

realised a new hunger, a trouble of urgency and doubt, in Anthony's lips. She pushed him away from her, but held him close enough for the light in his eyes to be visible; and there too she was aware of trouble.

"Does the future hurt you, Anthony, my beloved?" she asked him. "Don't you understand that it does not exist as a separate stretch of time, but only as something that makes part of this present happiness?"

"You talk of my ambitions," answered Anthony, with a sort of thickness in his voice. "Don't you know that I have given them up, that they mean nothing to me any more, that nothing will ever mean anything to me again except your eyes and your mouth and your hair and the warmth of your loving arms? Do you really suppose I risked everything without counting the cost, and judging the cost worth while? Everything else may go, so long as I have you."

"You have me," said Isabel, in a hushed and frightened voice.

"I know," cried Anthony painfully, straining her against him—"but I must have you wholly and for always! I must possess you, I must feel sure of you—I, and I only, of the whole of you, on and on——"

Isabel freed herself and rose. She turned half away from him, and stood for a few moments in silence, looking over the sea. She held her left breast closely to her with both hands, as if to quiet a pain in her heart. She saw in vision the lovers she had had, and the lovers she might yet have—a sad, wistful

procession they seemed suddenly, though each surely enriched by the love she gave. She did not begin to question : she still knew that she could do no other than she had done.

"You too, Anthony?" she said at last. "And I believed that you understood!"

THE END

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